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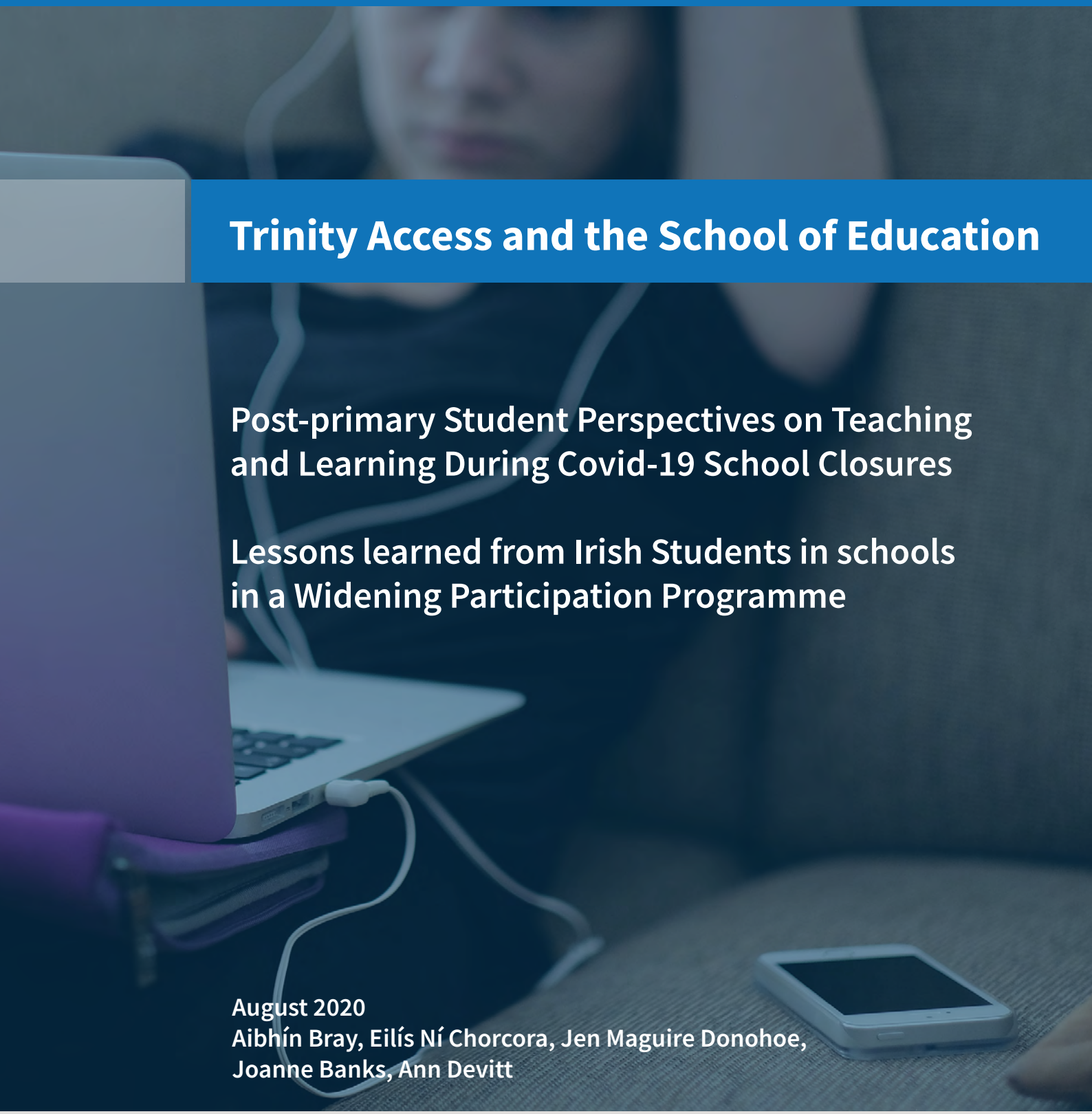

Trinity Access and the School of Education

Post-primary Student Perspectives on Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 School Closures

Lessons learned from Irish Students in schools in a Widening Participation Programme

August 2020
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About This Report

ISBN 978-1-911566-120

This report is downloadable here: http://hdl.handle.net/2262/93107

It is the third in a series of reports on the impact of Covid-19 school closures on education in Ireland. The report on post-primary teacher perspectives is available here: **http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/92883**. The report on primary parent perspectives is available here: **http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/92899**. A further report is currently being prepared which focus on school closures from the perspective of primary teachers.

Report compiled in collaboration with Trinity Access Principal Investigators: Dr Cliona Hannon (Director, Trinity Access), Professor Brendan Tangney (Co-Director, Trinity Access).

For more information: **http://www.tcd.ie/trinityaccess**

To cite this report: Bray, A., Ní Chorcora, E., Maguire Donohoe, J., Banks, J. & Devitt, A. (2020) 'Post-primary Student Perspectives on Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 School Closures: Lessons learned from Irish Students from schools in a Widening Participation Programme.' August 2020. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin. Available at: **http://hdl.handle.net/2262/93107**.

Peer reviewer: Dr Cliona Hannon, Trinity College Dublin.

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Acknowledgements

This report was compiled by members of the Trinity Access Research Advisory Panel (Aibhin Bray, Joanne Banks and Ann Devitt in the School of Education, Trinity College and Eilís Ní Chorcora and Jen Maguire Donohoe in Trinity Access) and with design support from Learnovate.

Trinity Access (TA) aims to transform the Irish education system, through work at student, school and system level, so that every young person can reach their full potential. They work in partnership across the education sector with students, teachers, families, communities and businesses to widen access and participation of under-represented groups at third level. The TA schools programme breaks down barriers by partnering with schools to develop strong 'college going cultures' and innovative approaches to teaching and learning through three Core Practices: Pathways to College, Mentoring and Leadership in Learning. Trinity Access receives funding from Rethink Ireland, the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Skills.

Many thanks to all of the students who took the time to complete this survey during this difficult time, and to the teachers and principals in the Trinity Access schools for supporting them.

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Abbreviations

AFL	Assessment for Learning
CAO	Central Applications Office
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCA	Directed Content Analysis
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
LC	Leaving Certificate
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NPHET	National Public Health Emergency Team
TY	Transition Year
SCP	School Completion Programme
SWEMWBS	Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

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Executive Summary

Overview

This report is the third publication in series of reports published by the School of Education in collaboration with Trinity Access in Trinity College Dublin. The aim of this research series has been to understand the impact of Covid-19 school closures on education in Ireland from a range of perspectives. The first two reports focused on the perspectives of second-level teachers (Devitt, Bray, Banks, & Ní Chorcora, 2020) and parents of primary school children (Devitt, Ross, Bray, & Banks, 2020). This third report in the series focuses on the Covid-19 school closures from the perspective of second-level students. The over 1,000 student respondents are from 15 schools in the greater Dublin area, which are part of the Trinity Access: a programme specifically aimed at increasing access to post-secondary education for students in areas of low progression to higher education. Previous research (Devitt et al. 2020a) has identified this cohort as being significantly more likely to have disengaged with their education during the lockdown. The data were collected as part of a broader longitudinal study by Trinity Access. The report therefore provides a unique insight on the experiences of students during the Covid-19 Pandemic but also an opportunity to compare their educational experiences with previous years. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What impact did school closures and working from home have on student wellbeing?
2. In what ways did teaching and learning, and engagement with education, change for students during school closures?
3. How did relationships between students and teachers change during school closures?

The report provides a critical analysis of the findings in the context of the existing research on young people and education, during and before Covid-19, in order to identify implications for policy and practice. In line with the previous publications, this report

adopts a solution-focussed approach and provides important evidence for policy for any future school closures and for school – home communication more generally.

Key Findings

Student wellbeing during school closures

Decline in student wellbeing during school closures

- The students surveyed reported lower scores on a wellbeing measure in 2020 compared to 2019.
- A perceived increase in workload was reported by students to be a source of stress during school closures.
- Where students reported negative relationships with their teachers or felt there was a lack of feedback about their work, they were more likely to have poorer mental wellbeing being during lockdown.
- Parental involvement in schoolwork was found to be linked to wellbeing, with students with more parental input less likely to have poor mental wellbeing during school closures.

Student views on changes to the Leaving Certificate

- Students have mixed views about changes to the Leaving Certificate examination.
- Approximately half of students agreed with the cancellation of the leaving certificate whereas just a third agreed the introduction of calculated grading.
- The findings highlight increased stress among some students in the move to calculated grading with many concerned about how the role of student-teacher relationships may impact on this process.
- Some students suggested that we use this unprecedented time as an opportunity to move away from high stakes examinations and have greater use of continuous assessment in senior cycle.

Changes to teaching, learning and school engagement

- Four out of five students reported that their workload increased during school closures and experienced increased levels of stress in relation to managing this.
- Students experienced less collaboration and communication with their peers during school closures.
- Students had mixed reports on levels of feedback from students during school closures with an increase for a significant proportion (37 per cent) but a decrease for over a quarter of students (26 per cent).
- Students reported using more technology for educational purposes and were more likely to self-direct their learning during school closures.
- Students' responses in relation to the provision and use of feedback from teachers indicates the critical importance of assessment for learning practices in sustaining student engagement and educational relationships.

Importance of Parental Involvement

- Level of parental involvement with education was predictive of levels of student wellbeing, active engagement with education and student-teacher relationships.

Policy implications

The findings of the report point to clear recommendations for policy for second level schools in Ireland. The following sections provide an overview of recommendations for policy stemming from the report's analysis.

System level recommendations

Student wellbeing during Covid-19

- Recognise the importance of the role of schools and teachers in identifying mental health difficulties among students. Support school principals and teachers to recognise anxiety and stress among their students and to source appropriate help and supports. A wellbeing contingency plan should be in place for staff and students in the event of any temporary school closures.

Widening participation in further and higher education for students from areas of low progression

- Given the findings around the importance of parental involvement in maintaining student engagement during school closures, the report argues that existing supports such as the Home School Liaison Scheme, which seeks to increase home-school communication, should be enhanced.
- Similarly, the role of the school guidance counsellor should be recognised as a support to students' mental wellbeing during these unprecedented times of school closures. Equally, this role should be supported to provide students with more traditional career guidance through the provision of resources and information around their choices post-school.
- Funding is needed for research and development on the impact of school-based programmes which seek to widen participation in education for students from areas of low progression.

Guidance for online teaching

- Given the resources available from organisations, such as the PDST, teachers should be made aware of supports aimed at facilitating online collaboration and the provision of feedback.
- Given the findings around the need for greater peer interactions in education online, guidelines around best practice for small group online teaching should be put in place to ensure online safety for children and young people.
- In the event of future temporary school closures, clear guidance should be provided to schools in relation to appropriate workload expectations for students working from home.

Senior Cycle Assessment

- The findings suggest the need to develop a plan for the 2021 Leaving Certificate examination that is flexible and adaptable and removes the emphasis off the terminal examination. The ongoing review of Senior Cycle (Smyth et al., 2019)

should be consulted in any future changes to senior cycle assessment in light of Covid-19.

School-level recommendations

Wellbeing

- Teachers should be made aware of CPD and resource available (such as the PDST) in relation to how to promote good mental wellbeing amongst students.
- Teachers could also use this time as an opportunity to 'check-in' with their students regarding their mental wellbeing. Information could be gathered from students around how students fared during school closures assessing what worked and what did not.

Student voice

- The report findings highlight the importance of listening to student feedback during school closures. In the context of learning online, information should be gathered around students' access to devices and broadband, and a quiet workspace, for example.
- The report findings also suggest the need for greater liaison between the student body and the school when learning online. This could be done through the creation, or further development, of student councils that can operate in a face-to-face or online context. These mechanisms could ensure that each class group has a method of having their voice heard.

Teaching and learning

- Develop a contingency plan in case of further lockdowns, making sure that a coordinated, whole-school approach is taken to the provision of online learning addressing in advance the issues of platform, timetable, and student workload.
- Prioritise professional development opportunities in relation to:
    - effective and time-efficient Assessment for Learning approaches (self- and peer- assessment, use of rubrics)

- collaborative work in online or socially-distanced spaces, in line with both health and safe-guarding best practice guidelines.

1. Introduction

On March 12, 2020, all pre-schools, schools and further and higher education institutions closed at the direction of the Irish government to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 virus. On the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) the initial proposed two-week closure extended to the summer break and schools were required to support their students to continue their learning at home and often online. The changes within the education system to teaching, learning and assessment over the last 3 months of the 2019-20 academic year, were sudden and dramatic for schools and learners, particularly for those in exam years. It is likely that there will be considerable direct and indirect repercussions of the pandemic on young people in the education system for many years to come (Darmody et al, 2020). Recent findings from the UK found that this is even more concerning for students in disadvantaged areas (Hutchinson, Reader and Akhal, 2020). At the time of writing, public health advice is allowing schools to re-open at the end of August, and children and young people across the country will return to school for the first time in five and a half months. However, the evolving public health situation means that schools need to have contingency plans in place for future full or partial school closures this academic year, whilst also managing the re-opening of schools under NPHET guidelines.

This report is the third publication in series of reports published by the School of Education, and has been written in collaboration with Trinity Access in Trinity College Dublin. The aim of this collection has been to understand the impact of Covid-19 school closures on education in Ireland from a range of perspectives. The first two reports focused on the perspectives of post-primary teachers (Devitt et al, 2020a) and parents of primary school children (Devitt et al., 2002b). This third report in the series focuses on the Covid-19 school closures from the perspective of second-level students. The over 1,000 student participants are from 15 schools in the greater Dublin area, which are part of Trinity Access: a programme specifically aimed at increasing access to post-secondary education for students in areas of low progression to higher education. The data were collected as part of a broader longitudinal study by Trinity Access. The report therefore

provides a unique insight into the experiences of students during the Covid-19 Pandemic, but also an opportunity to compare their educational experiences with previous years. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What impact did school closures and working from home have on student wellbeing?
2. In what ways did teaching and learning, and engagement with education, change for students during school closures and what was the impact of this?
3. How did relationships between students and teachers change during school closures and what was the impact of this?

The report provides a critical analysis of the findings in the context of the existing research on young people and education, during and before Covid-19, in order to identify implications for policy and practice. In line with the previous publications, this report adopts a solution-focussed approach and provides important evidence for policy for any future school closures and for school-home communication more generally.

This chapter places the findings of this second-level student survey in the context of emerging literature on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and their education. Section 1.2 outlines existing research in relation to student wellbeing prior to and during school closures. Section 1.3 examines the impact of student engagement with schooling and student-teacher relationships on educational outcomes in national and international research. Section 1.4 examines teaching and learning practices, in particular those associated with the development of key skills, and how these have been impacted during school closures. As this study was conducted exclusively in schools taking part in the Trinity Access programme, section 1.5 situates the study within the context of widening participation policy and research and details the unique structure of the Trinity Access whole-school approach.

1.1 Student wellbeing during the Covid-19 school closures

In Ireland, the most recent MyWorld Survey[1] found that over 40 per cent of adolescents have experienced depression and 49 per cent anxiety 'outside the normal range' (Dooley et al., 2019). Similarly, findings from the Growing Up in Ireland Study on 17/18-year olds showed 20 per cent of those surveyed in the 'likely to be depressed' category (McNamara, Murphy, Murray, Smyth, & Watson, 2020). For children and young people with pre-existing mental health difficulties, school closures during the Covid-19 Pandemic have meant a lack of access to resources normally available in schools (Lee, 2020; Sukhera, 2020). There is limited research on the specific area of student mental health and wellbeing specific to Covid-19 and school closures but a recent publication by Darmody et al. (2020) highlights this as an emerging research area. In their review of literature, they identify a number of studies from Spain, Italy , China, Switzerland and Sardinia that highlight changes in the behaviour of children during the Pandemic including increased anxiety, irritability, stress and in some cases depression among children and young people (p. 52-53). Some studies highlight this as a particular problem for children and young people with disabilities (Asbury, Fox, Deniz, Code, & Toseeb, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Emerging research also suggests that certain young people who are not currently displaying signs of mental distress may be 'incubating' poor mental wellbeing, which may present in later years (Poulton et al., 2020).

In Ireland, a number of studies have been undertaken in recent months addressing the topic of mental health or wellbeing among children and young people. One study involving 269 second-level students and their parents found that approximately 40% of students 'mostly did not enjoy' schooling at home and nearly half of students have said that schooling from home has had a negative effect on their mental health (Flynn, Keane, McCauley, Davitt, Heinz & MacRuairc, 2020). Furthermore, research of over 2500 parents in Ireland has reported that the majority of children miss their friends, miss school and are finding it difficult not being in the classroom (Kelly, Fleming, Demirel, & O'Hara, 2020). The Irish Second Level Students Union and the Institute of Guidance Counsellors published

[1] http://myworldsurvey.ie/

the 'Back to School Survey' which highlighted increased levels of anxiety, grief, fear and isolation among young people (ISSU & NPCPP, 2020). Similar findings around anxiety and worry (Darmody et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020) as well as loneliness and isolation (PSI, 2020a) were highlighted in the research. Moreover, in line with international research, children with disabilities appear to be particularly susceptible to poor mental health and wellbeing at this time (Inclusion Ireland, 2020).

Countries around the world are beginning to put systems in place to protect young people's mental health during this turbulent time. For example, in New Zealand the government have issued funding to support and wellbeing of learners and educators as well as providing targeted, specific guidance for schools in order to protect the wellbeing of more vulnerable groups in society such as children with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities (Ministry of Education, 2020; Poulton et al., 2020). During the recent school closures in Ireland, a number of policy guidelines were issued by the DES and the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS). Many of the resources were primarily aimed at children and young people and provided advice that ranged from practical guides for planning your day to techniques for relaxation (DES, 2020a). In May 2020, the DES published a report for schools on how to manage the mental health and wellbeing for Leaving Certificate students (DES & NEPS, 2020). Using literature on mental health and wellbeing for young people, the document provides schools with advice or guiding principles to help them help students manage stress and anxiety during this time of change and uncertainty. More recently, the DES created a designated 'Back to School' website and published a report for school leaders to support the wellbeing of the school community as they prepare to go back to school (DES, 2020b). This website focuses on the wellbeing of staff and students and uses an earlier wellbeing policy report (DES, 2019) in the context of wellbeing during the ongoing Pandemic. On July 27th, 2020, the DES announced a €376 million package to supports schools which included the provision of 120 new guidance posts 'to support student wellbeing' during this time (DES, 2020c).

During lockdown the Health Service Executive also issued a series of documents to help young people and their parents cope with the stresses of the Pandemic (HSE, 2020a; HSE, 2020b) and stress related to exams (HSE, 2020c). Adolescent mental health organisations such as Jigsaw have also provided a source of information and support for young people through articles, animation, videos, audio and live chats (Jigsaw, 2020). Similarly, the Psychological Society of Ireland has recently published a set of guidelines for schools to help them ease this transition as children go back to school in September (PSI, 2020b).

Exams tend to feature heavily in any discussions around student wellbeing or stress in school. Literature consistently highlights the negative impact of high stakes exams such as the Leaving Certificate on student stress (Banks and Smyth, 2015) and anxiety (Putwain et al., 2012). Given the timing of school closures in March 2020, it is not surprising that media speculation about these exams became an additional source of stress for the students due to sit the exams (McGuire, 2020; O'Brien, 2020). On March 19th 2020[2], the Minister for Education and Skills first announced the cancellation of oral and practical tests for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate subjects and the allocation of full marks to students for this portion of the examinations. A further announcement was made three weeks later, on the 10th of April 2020[3], as the Minister published the decision to postpone the written examination portion of the Leaving Certificate until late July/August and to replace the Junior Certificate with school-based examinations in the new school year. However, on the 29th of April 2020[4], the Junior Certificate arrangements were revised so that students would receive a certificate of completion of the Junior Cycle by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), and schools were given the freedom to host school-based assessments. Finally, on the May 8th 2020[5], the DES announced the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate with the option for students to avail of calculated grades or to sit the

[2] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/57646a-minister-mchugh-announces-cancellation-of-leaving-certificate-and-ju/
[3] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/687f2c-minister-mchugh-announces-postponement-of-state-examinations/
[4] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/d5d292-minister-mchugh-announces-revised-arrangements-for-junior-cycle-2020/
[5] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/63c85b-minister-announces-postponement-of-2020-leaving-certificate-examinat/

Leaving Certificate examination when it is safe to do so. On the 20th of May[6], the DES published guidance on the implementation of calculated grades and defined them as:

> *grades that can be provided to students following the combination of school information about a student's expected performance in an examination and national data available in relation to the performance of students in examinations over a period of time.*

The 2020 Leaving Certificate results are scheduled to be released on September 7th 2020 and so this report cannot speak to the success of calculated grades. However, it is clear that the use of calculated grades has the potential to permanently change the landscape of State Examinations. This is particularly important in the context of the ongoing review of senior cycle by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Smyth et al., 2019).

1.2 Attitudes towards learning and school and student-teacher relationships

National and international research has consistently demonstrated an association between children and young people's attitudes to school and their educational experiences and outcomes, such as performance in state examinations, relationships with teachers, and wellbeing (McNamara, Murphy, Murray, Smyth & Watson, 2020; Smyth, Banks and Calvert 2011; Huebner and Gilman, 2006; Wang and Holcombe, 2010). In the Irish context, the Growing Up in Ireland study reports predominantly positive attitudes to school among the students (McNamara et al, 2020). However, this is socially stratified with more negative attitudes to school reported by young people in more socially disadvantaged homes (GUI, 2016). As noted above, since school closures, forty per cent of students have reported not enjoying schooling (Flynn, Keane, McCauley, Davitt, Heinz & MacRuairc, 2020) and the potential impact of this on educational outcomes in the longer term remains to be seen.

Similarly, international research has suggested that the quality of student-teacher relationships has strong associations with a variety of different social, personal and

[6] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/06a3c-calculated-grades-a-guide-for-leaving-certificate-students-2020/

academic student outcomes. Studies have shown that student-teacher relationships influence many outcomes such as students' engagement with their schoolwork, their sense of belonging, and student behavioural issues in the school (Cohen et al., Eccles and Roeser, 2011., Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Irish studies have found that negative interpersonal relationships between students and teachers strongly predict early school leaving as well as lower educational aspirations and goals and poorer state examination grades (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Smyth et al., 2011). Smyth and colleagues found that the quality of relationship between students and teachers is predictive of achievement levels and even influences the amount of time students spend doing homework and studying (Smyth, 1999; Smyth et al., 2011). Furthermore, Irish researchers have found that the quality of these interactions are most predictive of examination performance and early-school leaving than any other school factors (Smyth, 1999). In the Growing Up in Ireland study, males and young people from the lowest income families were more likely to report negative interactions with their teachers (McNamara et al, 2020). Unsurprisingly, those who reported negative attitudes to school were more likely to report negative interactions with their teachers.

The findings of the Growing up in Ireland (GUI) longitudinal study of children at 17 and 18 years old illustrates the impact of these attitudinal variables on examination performance. McNamara et al., (2020) found that students' exam performance was significantly influenced by students' attitudes to school at ages 9 and 13 as well as student-teacher interaction in the early junior cycle years. These findings persisted even when many other factors such as family background, literacy and maths scores in primary school were taken into consideration (McNamara et al., 2020). The critical importance of student-teacher interactions is further underlined as students who received more praise were more likely to receive higher grades and students who had experienced more reprimands scored lower in their exams. These findings are significant even taking account of general attitudes towards school. The socially stratified nature of children and young people's reporting of attitudes to school and interactions with teachers strongly suggest that the

quality of the student-teacher relationship is particularly critical for students in schools with low progression to higher education.

Since school closures, Devitt and colleagues (2020a) found that students in DEIS schools were three times more likely than their peers in non-DEIS schools, to have low online engagement. Teachers working in DEIS schools reported finding it more difficult to contact vulnerable students and felt frustrated that they were not able to check-in with students as they would in a face to face setting. Broadband and access to resources have proved a barrier to communication with learners in particular in lower income areas (Mohan et al, 2020). In addition to the lack of access to technology, teachers reported challenges in relation to lower student engagement, as well as teachers finding it more difficult to foster personal connections in the move online (Devitt et al., 2020a). Studies conducted on school closures in Ireland have reported that schools have endeavoured to maintain communication with learners and families, with 70% of schools maintaining daily contact (Burke & Dempsey, 2020). Email has been the dominant mode of communication (Doyle, 2020), but DEIS schools, perhaps in response to DES guidance (DES, 2020c) were more likely to use phone calls to make contact with their learners (Devitt et al, 2020a). Irish studies have also highlighted significant increases in stress for both teachers (Devitt et al., 2020a; Burke & Dempsey, 2020) and students (Mohen et al., 2020, Doyle, 2020) which could also potentially have a negative impact on student-teacher relationships.

1.3 Maintaining key skills when learning online

Within the Irish education system, the Junior Cycle reform has sought to incorporate the development of 'key skills' (or '21st century skills') across the curriculum. This includes the development of skills such as Communicating, Managing Myself, Staying Well, Being Creative, Working with Others, and Managing Information and Thinking (NCCA, 2014). The literature suggests that such skills help to support individuals in their work, citizenship and self-actualisation (Dede, 2010; NCCA, 2011).

These skills are seen as necessary to empower young people to think critically, communicate effectively and work collaboratively, while also supporting students in learning how to take responsibility for their own learning (NCCA, 2014). Educators are encouraged to use innovative, student-led approaches and pedagogies to effectively integrate these skills across all subjects in different ways (NCCA, 2014). Recent research has shown that the integration of practices that support the development of key skills – project-based learning, teamwork, presentations, etc., commonly termed "21st Century" pedagogies – positively predict students' active engagement with education, educational aspirations and goals, wellbeing, and student-teacher relationships (Bray & Byrne, 2019; Bray, Byrne, & O'Kelly, in press).

There has been some debate as to whether the move online may create new and more effective ways in which to develop these non-tangible skills or whether online learning is more suited to the development of traditional academic skills and rote learning (Li and Lalani, 2020). An earlier report in this series explored post-primary teachers' perceptions of maintaining the development of key skills while teaching online. Teachers reported increases in practices associated with creativity and communication whereas practices associated with Working with Others, and in some cases Managing Myself and Staying Well have decreased (Devitt et al., 2020a). Mohan et al (2020) also point to a reduction in teaching and learning practices to support group and practical work. This study aimed to investigate students' experiences of how "21st century" teaching and learning practices in the study schools were sustained during school closures.

1.4 Programmes to Widen Participation in Further and Higher Education

In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority published 'The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015-2019' (HEA, 2015) in 2015, which aimed to provide equity of access across all levels of education. Participation in higher education has increased significantly in recent years with 20 per cent of young adults in Ireland progressing to higher education in 1980 compared to 55 per cent progression to a higher-level institution in 2017 (HEA, 2018). Despite this increase in participation, major social-

economic disparities persist (Hannon, Faas, & O'Sullivan, 2017; Hannon, 2020; McCoy et al 2014). Of those from areas of socio-economic disadvantage, just 27 per cent (non-manual worker groups) and 36 per cent (semi/unskilled manual worker group) of young people are progressing to higher education (HEA, 2018).

Previous research has demonstrated that barriers to educational progression of people from areas of socio-economic disadvantage include: underperformance in school (Chowdry et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2015; Keane, 2015), educational disengagement and negative perceptions of higher education (McCoy et al., 2014), issues with school organisation and process (Smyth & Banks, 2012), teacher attrition, financial issues, lack of information and guidance (McCoy et al., 2014), admissions processes in educational institutions as well as the high-stake focus on terminal exams at leaving certificate level (Higher Education Authority, 2010, 2015; Keane, 2011).

A major challenge for universities both nationally and internationally, is to address the lack of diversity and access for groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education, such as those from less advantaged socio-economic or ethnic minority backgrounds or those with disabilities. Access, widening participation, bridging or foundation programmes were introduced by many universities to reduce existing stratified race and class structures and to bridge the knowledge gap that often exists for non-traditional students. Their aim is to provide additional supports for students considered 'under-prepared' for the academic workload in first year (Shandler and Steenekamp, 2014). In Ireland, many universities introduced these programmes in the late 1980s and early 1990s to create equality of access to third level for students under-represented in higher education. The model for access programmes can vary, however, with some based in second level schools instead of universities. The focus of school-based programmes is often different as they aim to raise aspirations among young people and help them acquire the competence and language of learning that may support transitions to higher education.

The theoretical context of access programmes situated in school settings or universities is based on research that has consistently highlighted differential access to economic, cultural and social capitals based on differences in students' socio-economic backgrounds. This results in an attainment gap between students influenced by household income and family environment (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Irish research shows, for example, a clear social gradient in student attainment and attitudes to education influenced by family income and mothers' education.[7] Similarly, findings show differences in parental expectations, with those from professional backgrounds reporting higher educational expectations for their children in comparison to parents from working-class backgrounds (Schoon, 2010; Williams et al., 2018). Based on these findings, the ability of different social groups to gain access to various economic, cultural and social capitals during school closures may be even more relevant (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). A number of Irish and international studies published since the pandemic have highlighted how school closures has exacerbated existing economic and educational inequalities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Elliot Major & Machin, 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Bol, 2020; Vignoles & Burgess, 2020; Doyle, 2020; Mohan et al., 2020). These studies are vital in understanding the impact of school closures on already vulnerable students.

The Trinity Access Schools Project

This report is based on data collected in Irish second-level schools participating in the Trinity Access Schools programme. This in-school programme aims to support individuals from areas of low progression to higher education so that they can fulfil their academic potential. The programme aims to provide particular forms of cultural and social capital, in order to support the development of students' sense of autonomy and confidence in their abilities to make informed choices regarding future career paths, and to express clear educational aspirations. Their research demonstrates that students who are given the opportunity to develop higher-education-related social and cultural capital can develop a capability set critical to progressing to post-secondary education (Hannon et al., 2017).

[7] https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/socio-economic-data-and-maps/lc-points-socio-economic-background-edscatterplot-201718-enrolments/

Trinity Access was established in 1993 with 7 linked post-primary schools and has since grown to support 19 linked primary schools and 20 linked post-primary schools in the greater Dublin area as well as 1000 undergraduates in Trinity College Dublin. These schools are in areas of low progression to third level education. Trinity Access works closely with partners across the education sector and with wider communities and businesses in order to achieve its mission to widen participation to third level education.

The purpose of the Trinity Access programme is to encourage a positive mindset towards third level education and help to develop "college going cultures" in its linked schools. It operates with a lifecycle approach, engaging with pupils from primary school through to graduation and reaching out to second-chance learners through community groups nationwide. The Trinity Access Schools programme provides a unique support system for its linked schools through engagement with both students and teachers, in a whole school approach that aims to transform approaches to teaching and learning. In particular, Trinity Access supports teachers to engage 21st century pedagogies in their classes through formal (Postgraduate Certificate in 21st Century Teaching and Learning) and informal (thestaffroom.ie, community of practice model) professional development programmes.

Trinity Access has an extensive outreach programme for students in its post-primary linked schools which enforces the aim of its three core practices: Mentoring, Leadership in Learning and Pathways to College. Activities include but are not limited to academic grinds, campus tours, culture workshops, summer schools and law programmes. By building on the large amount of work Trinity Access linked schools undertake to encourage a "college going culture", these outreach programmes provide students with the opportunity to envision themselves in third level education by equipping them with the essential knowledge and skills required to progress.

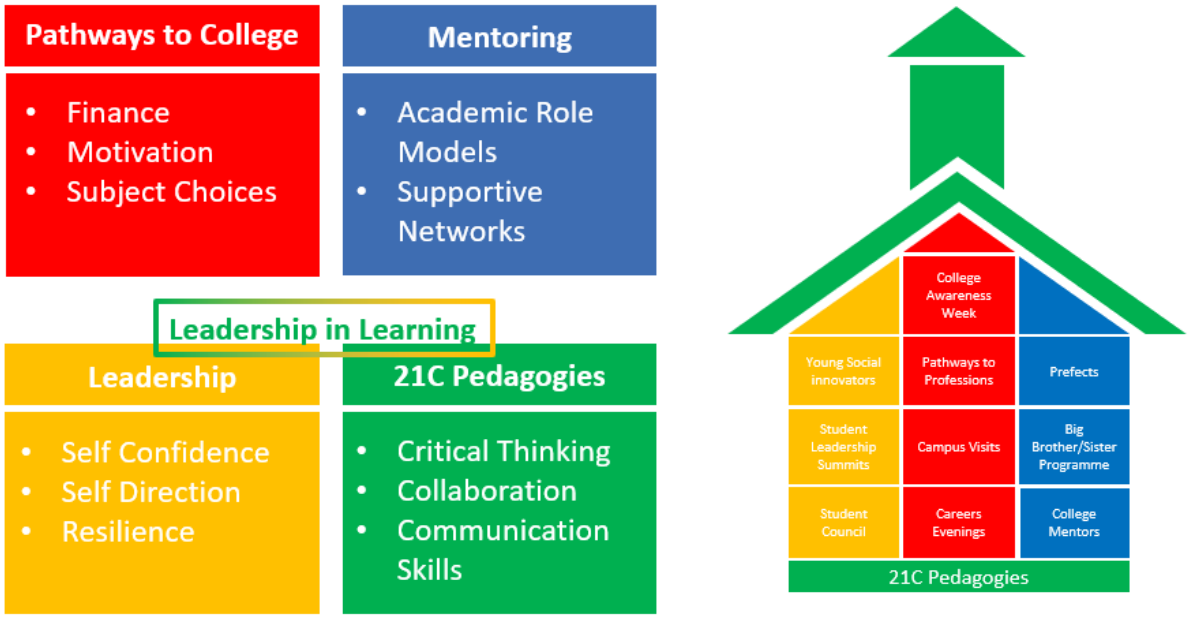

Figure 1.1: Trinity Access' Core Practices

This outreach programme uses an action research approach, with an annual cycle of three stages: observation, reflection/planning and action. By observing the students in the linked schools, Trinity Access can measure the impact of its supports while also providing schools with individual plans for their growth and development focused on the three core practices.

The announcement of school closures in March 2020 occurred during the second year of the Trinity Access longitudinal study. While the closures posed many obstacles to the collection of data it also created a unique opportunity to get a snapshot of how remote learning has impacted students. Slight changes were made to the survey to reflect the landscape of the virtual classroom and online learning during an international pandemic. However, the core of the survey remains the same to allow for comparison with the previous year's results.

1.5 Outline of the report

The rest of this report is structured as follows: Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used in this research and provides details of the Trinity Access linked schools and sample of

students. Chapter 3 focuses on student wellbeing during lockdown and provides an analysis of changes over time among a sample of 535 students that completed the survey in both 2019 and 2020. Chapter 4 examines student perspectives on teaching and learning and on student-teacher relationships during school closures. Chapter 5 offers a summary of the key findings and suggests policy recommendations that have stemmed from the results.

2. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology of the study and gives an overview of the characteristics of the students in the participant sample. It also outlines the descriptive, statistical and qualitative analyses that were conducted.

2.1 Questionnaire design

As described in Chapter 1, a sample of second level students in Trinity Access linked schools were invited to complete a self-report survey during May and June 2020. This survey is part of a longitudinal study exploring the impact of the Trinity Access programme on students in its associated schools. In order to maintain consistency and continuity in the longitudinal study, the bulk of the survey remained the same as the previous year, with some variations at the beginning of some scales to ensure that the students responded with respect to their recent experiences during school closures rather than retrospectively for the rest of the academic year. Additional open-ended questions were included in the final section of the survey to explore students' perceptions of teaching and learning online and attitudes towards the cancellation of state exams. The 25-minute survey was completed online using Qualtrics survey software. Students were asked a range of questions about their background, their attitudes and aspirations in relation to education as well as their experiences of changes in teaching and learning during the school closures and the move to online learning. In addition, the survey included items that investigated students' opinions about the cancellation of state examinations and the decision to introduce calculated grading.

Demographic information was also requested from each student. This included data on students' living situation, their families, country of origin, ethnicity, language spoken at home, whether or not they had a part-time job, and their parents' educational background. Reliability and validity of the questionnaire was ensured through the use of validated instruments where possible. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale (WEMWBS) was used to assess students' sense of wellbeing (Tennant et al., 2007). Students' level of active engagement with learning (Bundick, 2010), and student- teacher

relationships (Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly, 2006) were also measured using validated and reliable scales.

Information was collected in relation to students' perceptions of changes in teaching and learning since the move to online learning, with a particular focus on practices explicitly relating to Junior Cycle Key Skills (Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Self-Direction, Critical Thinking, and Using Technology for education) (Bray, Byrne, & O'Kelly, in press). In addition, students were asked about practices associated with the Trinity Access 21st Century teaching and learning model (Lawlor, Conneely, Oldham, Marshall, & Tangney, 2018), which include project work, groupwork, presentations, etc., as well as the levels of feedback and interaction from their teachers and peers during school closures.

2.2 Sampling

This report is based on data from a sample of students in second-level Trinity Access-linked schools in the broader Dublin area. These schools are linked with Trinity Access because they have catchment areas where progression to higher education is low. A total of 1004 second-level students from fifteen Trinity Access linked schools completed the survey during May and June 2020. Twelve out of fifteen schools have DEIS[8] status and the other three schools are all a part of the DES' School Completion Programme (SCP).

During the period March-May 2019, data were collected from 3863 students (Bray & Byrne, 2019). This first wave of data collection in 2019 involved members of the Trinity Access research team going out to schools and collecting data in person, using tablets with the survey pre-loaded on them. With the school closures in 2020, the survey was conducted online only, using voluntary response sampling, hence the lower response rate.

All students (across all year groups) who had previously provided their own and their parent/guardian's consent were invited to participate in the Trinity Access survey.

[8] DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is a national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of young people from disadvantaged communities.

Students were contacted by their principal/teachers via email and were sent a link to the online survey. Out of those who had given prior consent, 1004 students self-selected to complete the survey online. They were given unique identifier codes to allow their personal information to be pseudo-anonymised as well as allowing the Trinity Access research team to track participants over time. Unsurprisingly, the move to online, voluntary participation resulted in a drop in in the number of respondents from the previous year. Despite this, the researchers now have unique access to rich data from 535 second level students who have completed the survey at both time points.

It is important to recognise however, the potential bias inherent in the 2020 sample of 1004 respondents. Although the students are all from schools in areas of low progression to higher education, the majority of this sample appear to have adequate access to the resources that would allow them to participate in online learning and in this online survey (Figure 2.1). This is a far more positive picture than the one presented by recent research (Devitt et al., 2020a, Mohan et al, 2020), and should be taken into account when considering the results. It is also important to note that the students willing to respond to a voluntary survey of this kind, are likely to be those who are more engaged with their education.

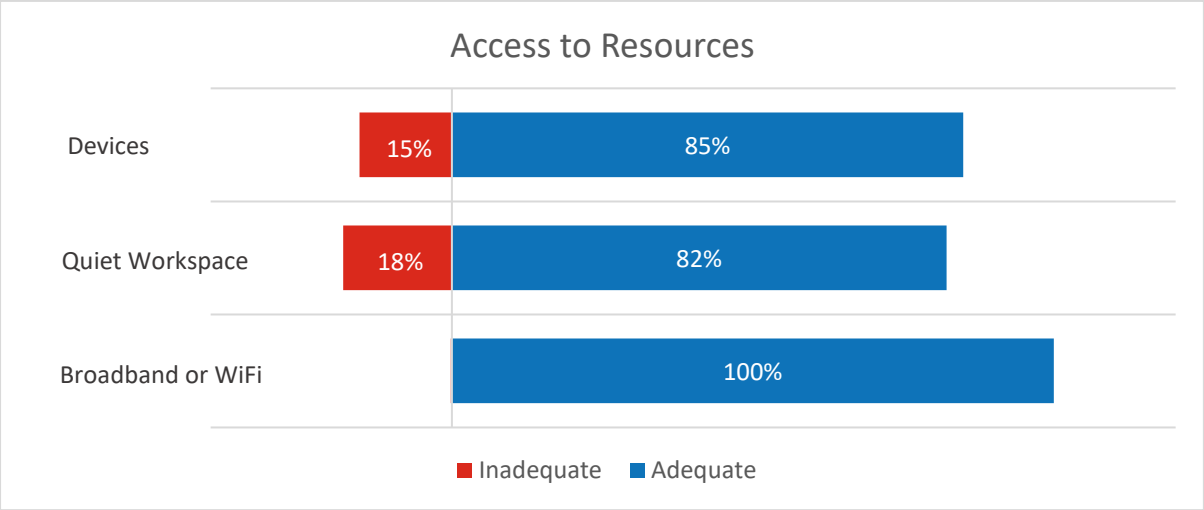

Figure 2.1: Access to resources

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

2.3 Demographics

The majority of the n=1004 students surveyed were female (68%), with roughly 59 per cent from junior cycle year groups (1st to 3rd year), 13 per cent were in Transition year (4th year) at the time of data collection, and 28 per cent from senior cycle year groups (5th and 6th year students). Figure 2.2 shows a breakdown of students' gender and year group.

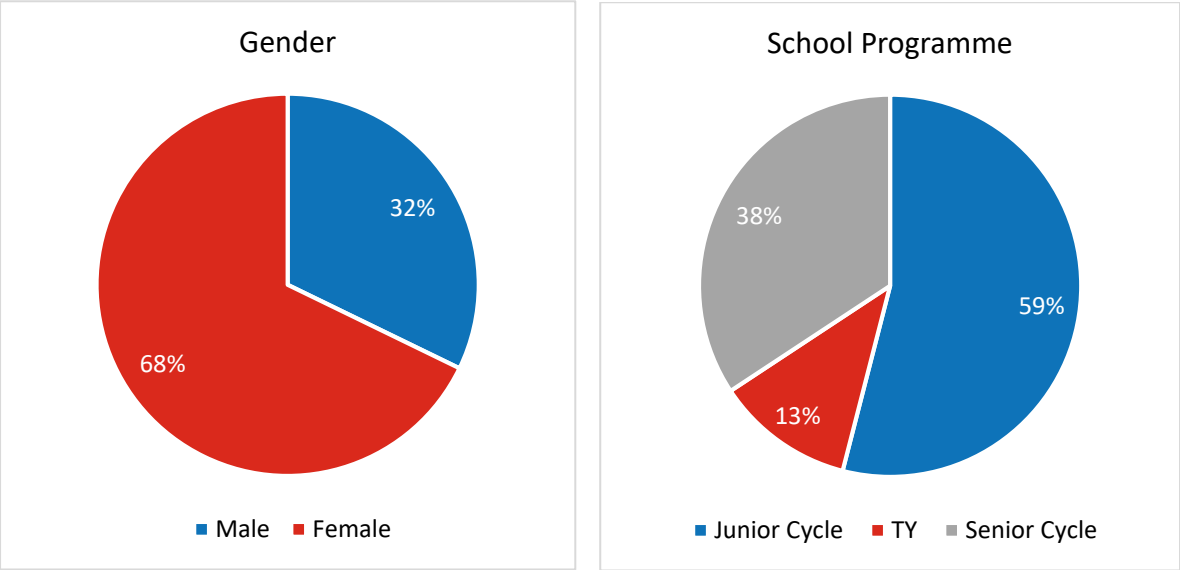

Figure 2.2: Gender and School Programme

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

With regards to family makeup, most students reported being part of a two-parent family (77%), with a fifth of students from a single parent family (Figure 2.3). Approximately a quarter of students' mothers had a degree-level qualification, while just 21 per cent of students' fathers had attended higher education.

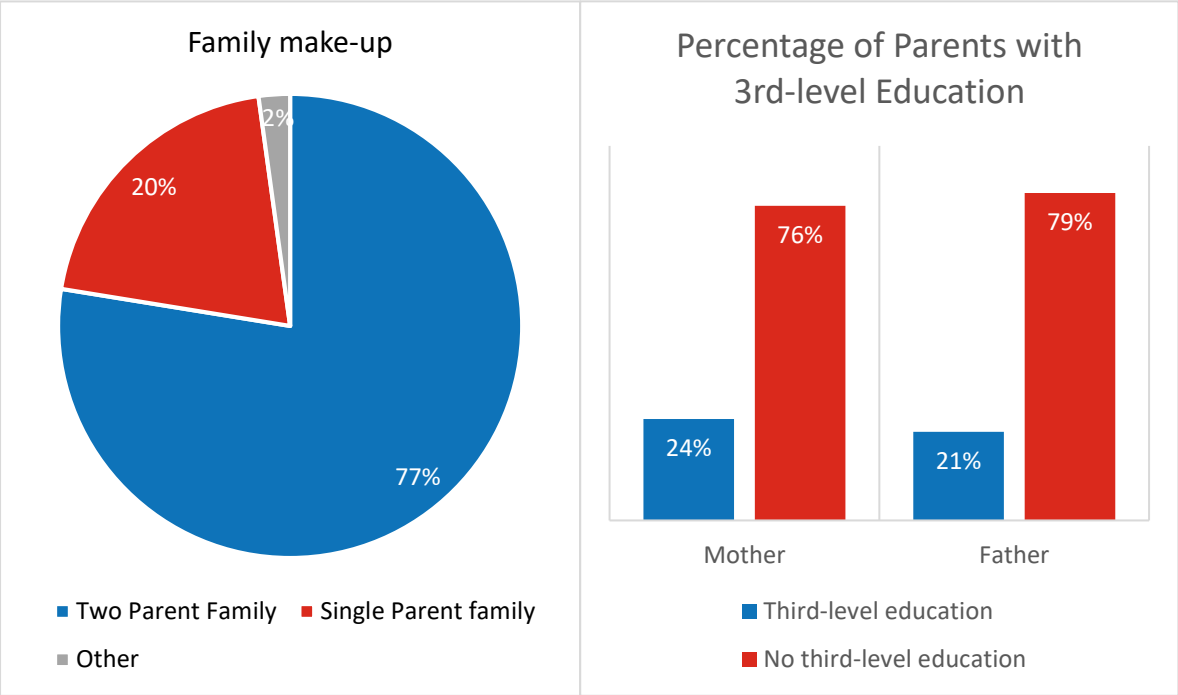

Figure 2.3: Family and Parental Education

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Figure 2.4 illustrates the proportion of students (and their parents) who were born in Ireland. Approximately 85 per cent of students who responded to the survey were born in Ireland. A lower percentage of their parents were born in Ireland with 34 per cent of students' mothers and 39 per cent of students' fathers reported to be born outside of the country. Students were also asked about the primary language spoken in the home: English was reported as being the main language by the majority of students. Eighteen per cent of respondents noted a different primary language in the home (Figure 2.3) with 36 other languages, including Irish, reported as home languages.

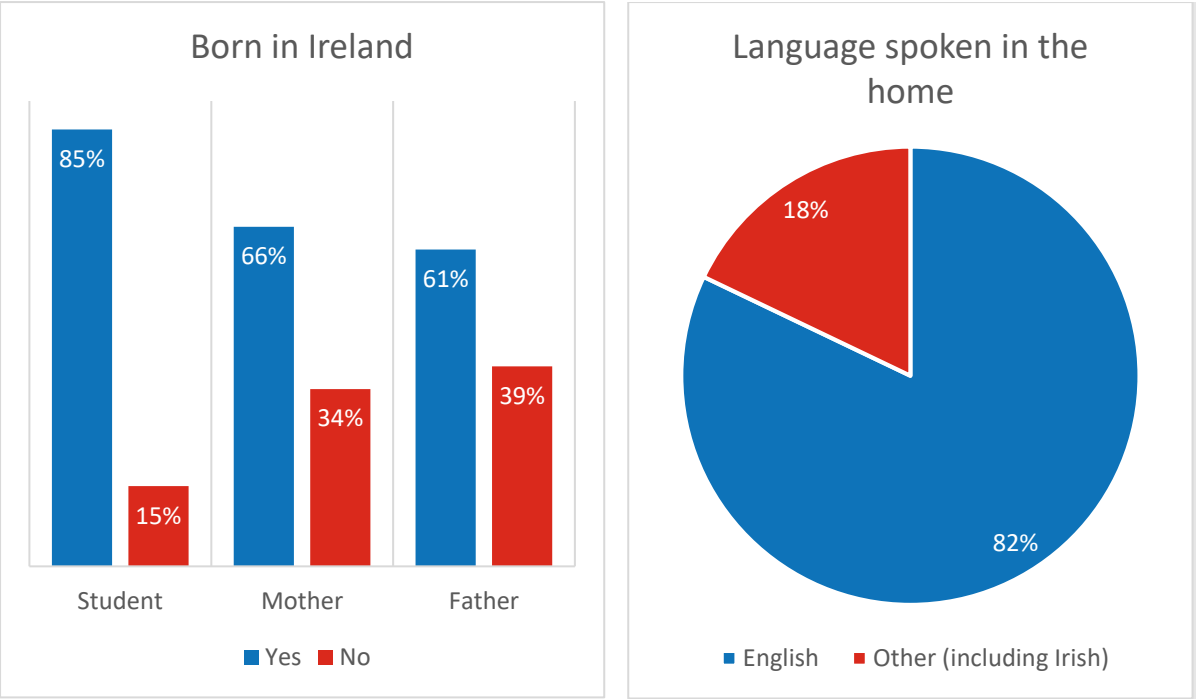

Figure 2.4: Birthplace and Primary Language

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Of those 535 students who completed the survey at Time 1 and Time 2, the demographics remain broadly similar to the overall cohort this year.

2.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analyses were used to examine student demographics (Section 2.3) and perceptions of changes in teaching and learning since school closures (Section 4.3). Longitudinal changes in student attributes between 2019 and 2020 are presented in sections 3.2 and 4.5.

The longitudinal nature of the Trinity Access student survey is of particular relevance during this period of lockdown, as it provides a unique opportunity to explore how certain student attributes may have changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 535 students filled in the survey in April/May 2019 and again in May/June 2020. Although not all of the survey items were the same in the two surveys, students were asked to report on a number of factors, including *wellbeing, active engagement with education,* and *student-*

teacher relationships[9] and in 2020, students were asked to respond in relation to the period of school closures. In order to identify statistically significant changes over time, paired samples *t*-tests were used.

In order to identify significant relationships between the changes in teaching and learning practices and the three student attributes under consideration (*wellbeing, active engagement with education,* and *student-teacher relationships)*, two approaches were used. Firstly, statistically significant relationships were determined through correlation analysis of the numerical data (from the 2020 survey responses). Having conducted the quantitative analysis, the results were used to provide a framework for directed content analysis of qualitative data from two of the open-ended survey questions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004). Directed content analysis of the qualitative responses, using the concepts of active engagement with education, wellbeing and student-teacher relationships, as well as the variables relating to teaching and learning practices, permitted deeper exploration of the relationships between the variables.

Multilevel binary logistic regression models were used to understand key factors influencing students' *wellbeing* (Section 3.3), their *active engagement with education* (Section 4.4), and *relationship with teachers* (Section 4.5). Student characteristics such as gender, school programme, and parental education were considered, as well as changes in teaching and learning practices since school closures.

For each of the models in chapters 3 and 4, the following factors are included:

1. Students characteristics including gender, school programme (Junior Cycle, Transition Year, or Senior Cycle), level of parental education, level of parental involvement in their education, single-parent family, and part-time job status.

[9] Wellbeing: https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-experience-measures/short-warwick-edinburgh-mental-wellbeing-scale/; Active engagement: http://quagliainstitute.org/dmsView/MV_Scale_Development; Student-teacher relationship and Aspirations and goals: http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/sei/default.html#:~:text=The%20Student%20Engagement%20Instrument%20(SEI,aspirations%20(cognitive%20engagement%20factors).

2. Changes in teaching and learning practices during lockdown, focusing on workload, feedback from teachers and peers, and exposure to '21st Century teaching and learning', which is calculated using a six-item scale, with statements that relate to practices supporting the development of key skills.
3. In addition to the above factors, and due to the significant body of research that highlights the importance of (a) student wellbeing on engagement with education (Frisch et al., 2005) and of (b) positive student-teacher relationships on both student wellbeing and on their engagement with education (Engels, Aelterman, Petegem, & Schepens, 2004; Van Petegem, 2008; Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, & Rosseel, 2008), where relevant, these student characteristics are considered in the models.

The student survey included four open ended questions, two of which related to positive/negative changes as a result of the move to online schooling, and were visible to all respondents; one that was only shown to third year students, and sought responses about the cancellation of the Junior Certificate; and another that was only visible to fifth and sixth years, relating to the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate. More than half of the respondents provided qualitative responses to at least one of the open-ended questions. Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2015) was used to explore qualitative responses in general. As noted above, for a more targeted analysis of the qualitative responses, Directed Content Analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004) was used to analyse the responses to two of the open-ended questions relating to the positive and negative impacts of the move to online teaching and learning. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis provides a rich depth of understanding of the experiences of these students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.5 Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the methodological approach taken in this report. It provides details of the sample, which was made up of Dublin-based second-levels students living in areas where progression to post-secondary education is low. By

analysing these rich student data, this report provides a much-needed insight into the impact of school closures on second-level students from some of the most disadvantaged areas of Dublin. This research will give the reader a unique insight into the student perspective of online learning during the Covid-19 school closures. The report highlights the voice of students experiencing educational disadvantage, a voice not often heard, particularly during the global pandemic, and gives a unique student perspective on teaching and learning online.

3. Student Wellbeing During Covid-19 School Closures

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, research is beginning to emerge that highlights the impact of Covid-19 on the mental wellbeing of children and young people. The focus of this chapter is to examine changes to student wellbeing during the Covid-19 school closures and highlight the factors influencing poor mental wellbeing among those surveyed. Using a mental wellbeing measure, the chapter firstly examines changes in student wellbeing between those surveyed in 2019 and 2020 and examines the factors influencing wellbeing such as perceived reduction in feedback and connection from teachers and perceived increased workload. The second part of this chapter provides an analysis of a multi-level logistic regression model to explore the factors influencing poor mental wellbeing. Using students' qualitative responses, the final section explores a key point of stress in the recent school closures that involved changes in the Leaving Certificate examination in light of the Covid-19 school closures.

3.2 Changes in student wellbeing

For the purpose of the analysis in this chapter, wellbeing relates to students' affective and behavioural mental wellbeing, and is measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), which asks them to report on their feelings during the previous two-week period. The scale is composed of seven items that are all worded positively and cover both affective and behavioural aspects of mental wellbeing. It is a well-established instrument that has been validated for use with young people as well as the general population. The Scale has been widely used at an international level for the monitoring and evaluation of programmes that aim to positively impact wellbeing, and for investigating the determining factors of mental wellbeing (McKay & Andretta, 2017; Ng Fat, Scholes, Boniface, Mindell, & Stewart-Brown, 2017). Scores obtained using this instrument can be compared with English national survey data, thus providing a metric by which to consider the results.[10]

[10] https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/howto/wemwbs_population_norms_in_health_survey_for_england_data_2011.pdf

Statistically significant differences were identified between the wellbeing scores of the cohort of students who completed the survey at two time points, with statistically significantly lower values for wellbeing reported in 2020.[11] Figure 3.1 illustrates the scores obtained by the 535 students who completed the survey in 2019 and 2020, as well as the national average score (for adults) in England in 2011. While it is important to note that these two populations are very different, and that people from families with social or economic disadvantage are likely to have lower levels of wellbeing (McNamara et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2009), it still provides a valuable reference point for these data.

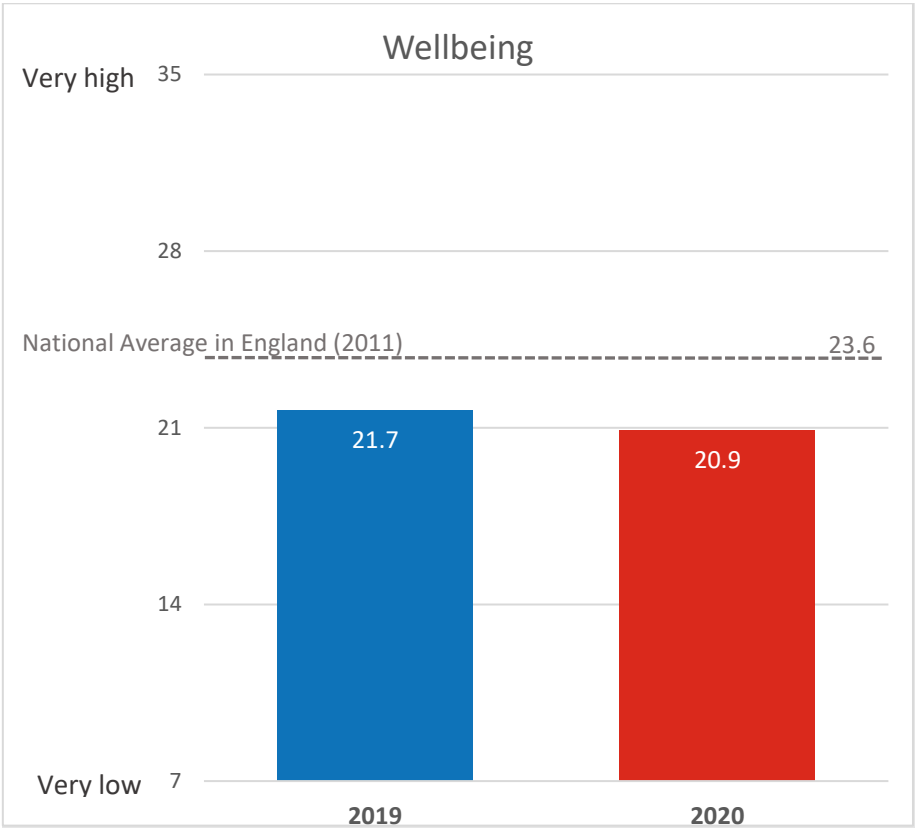

Figure 3.1: Change in Student Wellbeing Scores

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020 & Trinity Access Student Survey, 2019

It is clear from these results that student wellbeing in this cohort, while already lower than the English national average, has decreased significantly during the lockdown period.

[11] $t(534) = 3.894$, $p < .001$

Qualitative responses to open questions in the survey also highlights how some students felt they didn't cope well with the move to education online:

> *Online school has been more difficult for me and has led to a lot of stress. This method of learning is obviously needed at the moment; however it has not been in any way effective for me*

> *It has been a big change and I wasn't able to cope well*

Mohan et al (2020) survey of school principals suggested that students in DEIS schools found it more difficult to adapt to online learning than in non-DEIS schools. The reduction in well-being scores is not surprising, and indeed, government provision has already been put in place to support student wellbeing for the reopening of schools in September 2020 (DES, 2020d).

3.3 The role of teacher feedback, workload and parental support in student wellbeing

In line with previous research (Devitt et al., 2020a; Devitt et al., 2020b) that highlights the importance of teacher feedback for maintaining student engagement during lockdown, the findings in this report also point to a strong relationship between student wellbeing and the extent to which they received feedback from their teachers.[12] The qualitative findings were mixed around teacher feedback however, with some students describing the lack of face-to-face feedback being as a source of stress:

> *It's very overwhelming and stressful since you can't as much help as you used to and it's harder to learn things at home.*

Other students however, described how working online with their teachers meant they were keeping on top of their work:

> *I'm able to keep up with deadlines better. I can get lots of feedback from my work and I am less stressed about school.*

[12] Teacher feedback and wellbeing: $r(533) = .17$, $p < .001$; Peer feedback and wellbeing: $r(532) = .15$, $p = .001$

Others felt that the move online and their inability to engage in face-to-face teaching and learning was negatively impacting their mental health:

> *It's horrible especially for your mental health getting all this work on top of you everyday and not being able to understand as you understand from watching and talking, but now I can only read the same thing over and over.*

The survey also explored students' perceptions of workload during school closures. Interestingly, no statistically significant relationship was identified between increased workload and student wellbeing. However, the qualitative analysis indicates that for many students the increased workload did indeed negatively impact on their levels of stress. Some students described increased stress as a direct result of increases in their workload:

> *Honestly, I think the workload amount has increased exponentially and has put a lot of unneeded stress on me. My peers and friends have agreed it's definitely a lot more stress.*

Changes in the level of teacher and peer interaction and feedback also emerged as having a strong relationship with student wellbeing. This was particularly notable in relation to decreases in peer feedback and interactions and low student wellbeing:

> *Mental health issues for most people due to lack of social interaction, lack of motivation, stress levels increased.*

> *[There is] a lot more stress. Teachers seem to be busier and less responsive to questions according to my peers and friends. Just a lot more work too and deadlines met at the same times from 8 separate subjects constantly asking for new work whilst others ask for work too is extremely stressful and too hard to keep up with.*

Analysis of the quantitative data using multilevel binary logistic modelling, permitted the identification of the significant predictors of low wellbeing among the students during the Covid-19 school closures. Results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Factors influencing Low Wellbeing

Factor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	.412	1.782**	1.263*
Students characteristics • Parental involvement with student's education	-.525***	-.507***	-.469***
Teaching and learning • Feedback from teachers • Feedback from peers		-.354* -.535*	-.294* -.523*
Student experience • Poor student-teacher relationship			.994***
Nagelkerke R2	.063	.109	.150

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Note: From a logistic regression model.

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; © p<.10.

The findings in the model show the extent to which the perceived level of parental involvement in the student's education was significantly predictive of their wellbeing during the school closures. In fact, for every increase of 1 point on the parental involvement scale, the odds of students being in the low wellbeing category decreased by a factor of 0.7.

In line with the qualitative findings above, the model also shows how feedback from teachers plays an important role in student wellbeing with students reporting low levels of feedback more likely to report low levels of wellbeing, controlling for other characteristics. Similarly, where student-teacher relationships are reported as being poor by the student, wellbeing scores are also low, with results from the logistic regression indicating that students who rated their relationships with their teachers as poor, were 2.7

times more likely to be categorised as having low wellbeing. One student described the impact of negative relations with their teachers on their mental health and wellbeing:

> *I've been suffering from insomnia and depression and anxiety all I get is giving out to for not having work done. I understand I need it done but it's heightens how you feel.*

3.4 Student reactions to the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate examination

As discussed in Chapter 1, exams tend to feature heavily in any discussions around student mental health, wellbeing or stress in school. Literature consistently highlights the negative impact of high stakes exams such as the Leaving Certificate on student stress (Banks and Smyth, 2015) and anxiety (Putwain et al., 2012). When schools closed on the 12th of March 2020, few people could have predicted the significant length of time they would remain closed, or the fate of the Leaving Certificate examinations. This section gives an insight into the perspectives of 5th and 6th year students on the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate examinations and the subsequent decision to use calculated grades to determine students' results and their CAO points.

Students were asked to rate their agreement with the decision to cancel the Leaving Certificate exams and the use of calculated grades. Results are displayed in Figures 3.2 and 3.3 below. These results corroborate findings by Flynn and colleagues that suggest students were split about how they felt about the changes to the current Leaving Certificate examination (Flynn, Keane, McCauley, Davitt, Heinz & MacRuairc, 2020). Students were also asked an open-ended question about their feelings and opinions on these issues. These qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis and the results are outlined under the following three themes: *Student's Wellbeing*, *Student-Teacher Relationship* and *The Future of the Leaving Certificate.*

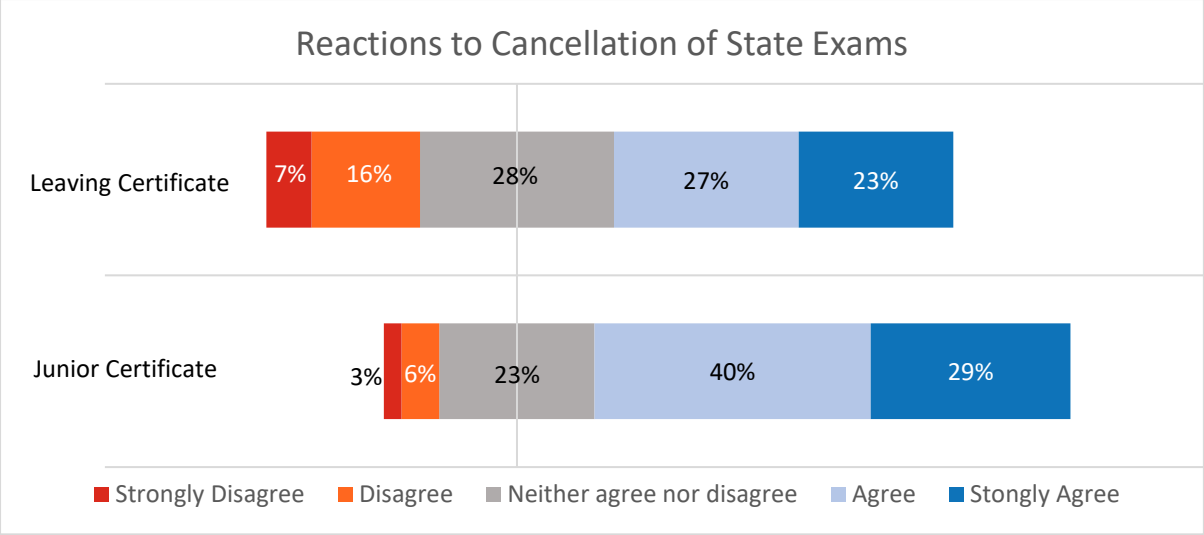

Figure 3.2: Students' agreement with the Cancellation of State Examinations

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

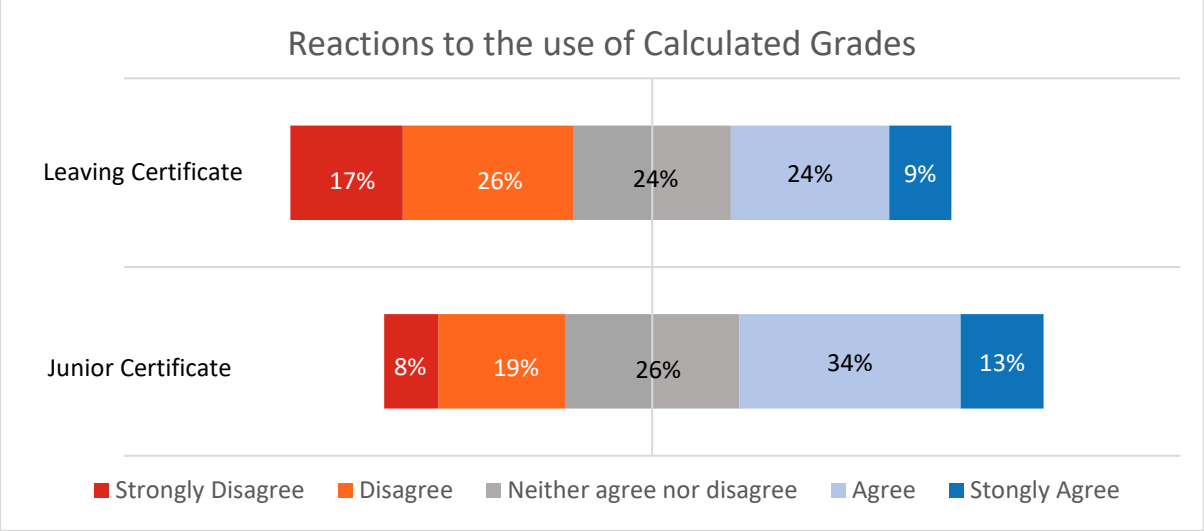

Figure 3.3: Students agreement with the move to Calculated Grading

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Young people in 5th and 6th year recognised that the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate had implications for both their physical and mental wellbeing. In terms of their physical health, students mostly felt it was the right decision in order to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

I think it was a fair decision as going ahead with the exam would have been a risky decision which could potentially harm our health or those of our loved ones.

At first, I was really angry and lost about it but now I understand that it is the best option for current circumstances.

In terms of students' mental health, there were mixed emotions from students in relation to the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate examinations and the move to calculated grades. On the one hand, many students noted that the decision to cancel exams was a 'weight lifted off my shoulders' as they had experienced a large amount of stress and anxiety over the uncertainty of the situation and were glad to finally have a decision on the matter:

I feel that making the Leaving Cert students sit their exams in the current situation would have been cruel. It would have put the mental health of many students at risk, and it would have been extremely unfair to those with difficult conditions and those dealing with loss or sickness in their family. Cancelling the exams was the right decision.

Students spoke about how many young people were experiencing stress and anxiety due to being at home all the time and not being able to go to school. Certain students felt that the decision to cancel the exams was 'too little to late' and that students were 'left in the dark for the majority of the lockdown'. Some students spoke about the upheaval that could be going on in a young person's life at home, behind closed doors. One student urged the reader to be mindful of the difficult circumstances that some people have at home and the stress that this invokes:

It's very hard to adapt to something entirely new. Some people are under so much stress that they cannot cope, they cannot get themselves together, they simply cannot get the work done. You might have thought some students haven't submitted work over laziness but I'm sure those students have their

reasons not to. Maybe they live in a toxic household and they're just so upset over something that they can't even bother with school.

Although students were glad to have the choice of either accepting their calculated grade or sitting the exam in 2021, they found it frustrating that if they opted to take the exam, they would not be in the same year group as their friends in college and that they would therefore not be able to relate to these peers:

I do like the fact that if we want to we can choose to sit the exam when it is safe but I feel that when the time comes that it will be safe we will have missed the first year of college and be behind and unable to relate to our school friends which can and could be frustrating.

On the other hand, some students spoke of how the move to calculated grades evoked more stress as they were concerned that they might feel 'hard done by' after receiving their calculated grades if they feel they could have done better by sitting the exam. Furthermore, students raised the issue that some individuals are simply better at studying when under time pressure constraints. Students were also anxious about the repercussions of the calculated grading system in terms of how it would affect the points system, and whether it could be easier or more difficult to get into certain college courses. This sense of fear and confusion at the uncertainty of the situation is illustrated below:

I feel confused and I'm scared because I don't know what will happen since this is the first time it has happened. There are so many different routes to take (resit exams, predicted grades) that I don't know which will be the most beneficial for me.

Some students expressed concern about the impact that calculated grades will have on individuals in terms of gaining entry to college courses as well as how they will fare if they gain a place on a college or university course:

I am happy that the stress with the Leaving Cert is over, but I believe that the predicted grades won't get me to the college I want to go to.

Some students' classwork doesn't equal the grade they would get in an exam. It's unfair on students who do terrible in school but great in exams. Also, if you do good work in school, then predicted grades will be higher, possibly opening up a 'better' course that may be too stressful and we might see many students dropping out of courses come the new academic year.

Overall, it was clear that students were very concerned about their mental health at the time of survey and the negative impact that school closures and the modified Leaving Certificate would have on them and their peers as they progressed to post-secondary education. Students urged the reader to take their mental health 'seriously' and called for action to be taken to ensure its protection:

Mental health is truly a real and big thing and it feels like no one is actually taking it seriously.

Many students also raised the issue of how student-teacher relationships could impact on calculated grades being used as part of the Leaving Certificate examination. Some students were worried that there might have been a bias amongst teachers to give higher or lower grades to certain students based on the quality of their relationship:

Predicted grades will not in any way give the correct grades to each student. There will be an unconscious discrimination to some students from some teachers as it is human to do so.

One student also highlighted potential difficulties for students who have been absent frequently during the year, as their teachers may not have sufficient evidence of their ability:

I think this outcome heavily impacts students who weren't able to attend school as much as other students whether it was because of personal or medical reasons and were unable to participate in class tests or assignments.

Others highlighted how teacher perceptions of them during the year may not be accurately reflected in their calculated grade. They acknowledged that some students

may do little work during the year but still achieve high grades in the actual exam due to an increased study schedule closer to the exam:

> *I am very disappointed that the leaving certificate is cancelled and predicted grades will be used. I believe this does not show all the work that the student has put in as the last test I sat was my mocks in February and since then I have been working extremely hard but I have not sat any tests to prove this so therefore I feel that this hard work is gone to waste and will go unnoticed.*
>
> *I believe it will negatively impact far more students than it will positively impact them. Many students who should have been sitting the leaving cert may have treated the majority of the school year with a lax attitude and believed that they would prove themselves in the actual exam. It may not be a healthy attitude towards it, but it is likely a common one.*

Concern was also raised about the fact that the DES had the authority to change a student's grade even after the teacher had made their final decision on the results. One respondent highlighted that 'this also is going against basic traditions of the Leaving Cert and taking out the whole anonymous element of the LC (Leaving Certificate)'.

Finally, some students felt that the use of calculated grades placed an unfair burden on their teachers due to the increased workload, and the fact that they were forced to make a decision which would greatly impact on students' future education and career path:

> *I think that predicted grades are unfair both to students (who may not get their desired points based on the opinion of a teacher) and also to teachers (as they are basically being given the responsibility of deciding the rest of the students life).*
>
> *I like to think that it would have been possible to take measures to safely go forth with the exam as oppose to increasing the workload of teachers a great deal and negatively impacting students with prescribed grades.*

3.5 Students' thoughts on the future of the Leaving Certificate

It was clear from the qualitative analysis that 5th year students who are due to sit their Leaving Certificate exams in the summer of 2021 are gravely concerned about the impact that school closures will have had on their ability to achieve academic success. Students refer to being at a disadvantage as they have had to 'self-teach' for 'over a third' of the school year. They spoke about not covering nearly the same amount of content as they would have if they were in school:

> *I also feel it is unfair on the current 5th years as we have missed out on months of our bulk work on our courses and have been self-teaching. This is going to mess us up next year.*

Incoming 6th year students report feeling forgotten about. Many are disappointed as they feel their education has been impaired due to school closures. They add that appropriate arrangements need to be made to support them:

> *I feel like that the 5th years are a bit overlooked as most of 6th year is just a revision year while in 5th for the past few months, we've basically been having to teach ourselves.*

> *I also feel that the state is ignoring the 5th Years and the effect that the pandemic will have on our studies, as at the moment, we are expected to proceed with our Leaving Cert as if nothing had changed.*

Moreover, 5th year students described anxiety at potential increases in CAO points next year due to a possible increase in demand for courses if students are not happy with their calculated grades and opt to sit the exams in 2021:

> *They will choose to do the leaving certificate when possible which will affect the 5th years when they do the leaving certificate as there will be more demand to get into colleges and courses leading to the points getting higher. If the points get higher it will be near impossible for current 5th years when doing their leaving certificate as we have missed out on half our courses.*

My only concern would be what this means for CAO points next year, will they be higher than usual? Will it be more difficult to get into the course that I want?

Interestingly, some senior cycle students stated that they hope that the decision taken this year to cancel the Leaving Certificate will lead to the dissolution of the examinations in their current format. Students noted that it is unfair that 'years of learning be based on 'one exam', which might not go well on the day. Instead, students called for continuous assessment to be used to inform their Leaving Certificate results as they feel it would be less stressful and a more accurate representation of their abilities:

Hopefully the leaving cert will be completely removed from now on and continuous assignments take its place.

It's not fair to base 6 years of work on one exam instead it should be a continuous assessment of how the student does all year around in school.

These findings are in line with student feedback gathered as part of the ongoing review of senior cycle by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment where students emphasised the stress associated with the high stakes nature of the exam and the need for greater use of continuous assessment (Smyth et al., 2019).

3.6 Summary

Using rich data gathered from students during the recent school closures, this chapter focussed on student mental health and wellbeing. The longitudinal nature of the broader Trinity Access study meant that a clear comparison could be made between student reports of mental health and wellbeing in 2019 and 2020. The findings highlight how students reported statistically significantly lower levels of wellbeing in 2020 during lockdown compared to the previous year. Qualitative findings from the open-ended questions provide an opportunity for identification of some of the reasons for lower wellbeing among students, which include a lack of, or reduced, feedback from their teachers, a lack of connection with their peers and a perceived increase in workload during the period of lockdown.

The chapter provides the results of a multi-level logistic regression model which sought to examine the factors predicting low levels of wellbeing among students. The findings highlight the extent to which parental involvement influences wellbeing, with low parental involvement being a predictor of low levels of student wellbeing. Furthermore, students who report lower levels of interaction with their peers and poor feedback from teachers are more likely to report lower levels of wellbeing. Not surprisingly, negative relationships with teachers was also found to be predictive of low wellbeing among students.

The final two sections of this chapter examined the impact of changes to the Leaving Certificate examination on student wellbeing and stress. The findings highlight mixed views among students about the cancellation of exams and the introduction of calculated grading with half of those surveyed agreeing or strongly agreeing with the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate examination. Students were less convinced about the use of calculated grading with just 33 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing with its introduction in place of the traditional examination. The qualitative findings from students provide important insights into the failings of the current Leaving Certificate examination system in adequately representing their work and achievement in schools. The findings also highlight students' concerns and the stress involved in the move to calculated grading, with many highlighting the significance of student-teacher relationships in this process.

The chapter also provides insights into student perspectives on the future of the Leaving Certificate for students entering their final year. The findings show concern by students about the interruption to their studies in their 5th year with some suggesting the need to use this time as an opportunity to reform the Leaving Certificate and move away from high stakes examinations towards continuous assessment in senior cycle.

4. Student experiences of teaching and learning

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored student wellbeing during the Covid-19 school closures. This chapter focuses on changes in the student experience of teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic and the move to online education. The focus of the chapter is the home-learning context, teaching and learning practices, student engagement with schooling and student-teacher relationships. Section 4.2 sets out key elements of the student's home-learning situations during school closures (access to resources and space and perceptions of workload). Section 4.3 examines perceived changes in teaching and learning practices, with section 4.4 examining students' active engagement with learning during school closures, and the factors that influenced this. Section 4.5 explores the student-teacher relationship and factors impacting on this.

4.2 The student home learning context and experience

Students were asked to provide details of their home learning situation, in particular access to devices, broadband, and a quiet space. While access to broadband in this cohort was universal, as noted in chapter 2, access to devices was more mixed. Eighty-five per cent of students reported they had access to a device for schoolwork but nine per cent indicated that this was only available sometimes and six per cent had no access. The Tech2Student initiative,[13] a collaboration between Trinity Access, Camara and the ESB, worked with schools in the Trinity Access programme to provide devices for students in need, but this did not achieve universal coverage. A majority of students had a quiet space in which to work but almost eighteen per cent did not. As hypothesised in existing research (Darmody et al, 2020; Lancker, 2020), this analysis found that a lack of an appropriate space for working was associated with lower active engagement and lower wellbeing scores for the students.[14]

[13] https://www.tcd.ie/trinityaccess/tech2students/

[14] Independent sample t-tests conducted: Active Engagement t(533)= -0.216, p=0.002; Wellbeing t(533)= -2.428, p=0.000

I am unable to have a quiet room for the entire day. I do not always get use of the laptop, my brother's need to use it as well. My family disturb me at times. I have less concentration at home. I get less completed at home despite spending more time working.

As regards student workload, almost seven out of ten students (sixty-nine per cent) reported an increase in their school workload during school closures. The qualitative responses in the previous chapter attest to this and to the significant impact on student stress levels. Indeed, almost a quarter of the 524 students who provided qualitative responses included negative comments about the heavy workload. Students reported that they had much more work than they would normally get in school. A number of students also indicated that the timing and deadlines for work were very difficult to manage and were not well considered by teachers.

Workload increased by 300% literally, teachers are not aware of the time we have available and the conditions we are in, being eluded that we have 24 hours a day just for that 1 subject since "we do not have school".

Too much work given out in such a small amount of time, expecting it to be done

Some students commented that even though they are doing more work, they are not learning as much:

Just a lot of work. Way too stressful. Boring way of learning. Work is being done most of the time but actually understanding the work is out of the question.

At least one school in the sample took a whole school approach to tackling the issue, and fully engaged with the student body.

The workload is was a lot and it was making me stressed and anxious and overwhelmed more often, but my teachers and principal listened and changed the workload to one piece of work a week from each subject to help relieve our stresses as students.

This, however, did not appear to be the norm.

As regards the students' responses to this situation, in addition to measures of student wellbeing discussed in the previous chapter, students were asked to respond about their feelings towards school and learning in the a*ctive engagement with education* scale[15] and to their perception of their relationships with their teachers[16]. Chapter 1 set out the impact of these measures on a range of education factors including behaviour and student learning outcomes (Section 1.3).

In relation to student active engagement with learning, the scale addresses how fun and interesting the students find school and learning and whether they enjoy the challenge presented by their education. Despite the adverse conditions and workload concerns, overall students in this survey responded positively as regards their active engagement with school and learning. The average student active engagement measure was 3.51 on a 5-point scale (mean=3.51, stddev=0.669). Similarly, on the 5-point scale of student-teacher relationships, most students reported positively as regards their relationships with their teachers (mean=3.62, stddev=0.728). These measures are explored in more depth in sections 4.4 and 4.5 below.

4.3 Changes to teaching and learning

In order to ascertain how students were engaging with learning during school closures, students were asked whether they felt that certain practices had increased, stayed the same, or decreased during the period of school closures. The teaching and learning practices in question focused on those that support the development of the key skills of collaboration (working with others), communication, critical thinking (managing information & thinking), creativity, self-direction (managing myself) and using technology for education (Figure 4.1).

[15] Bundick, 2010
[16] Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly, 2006

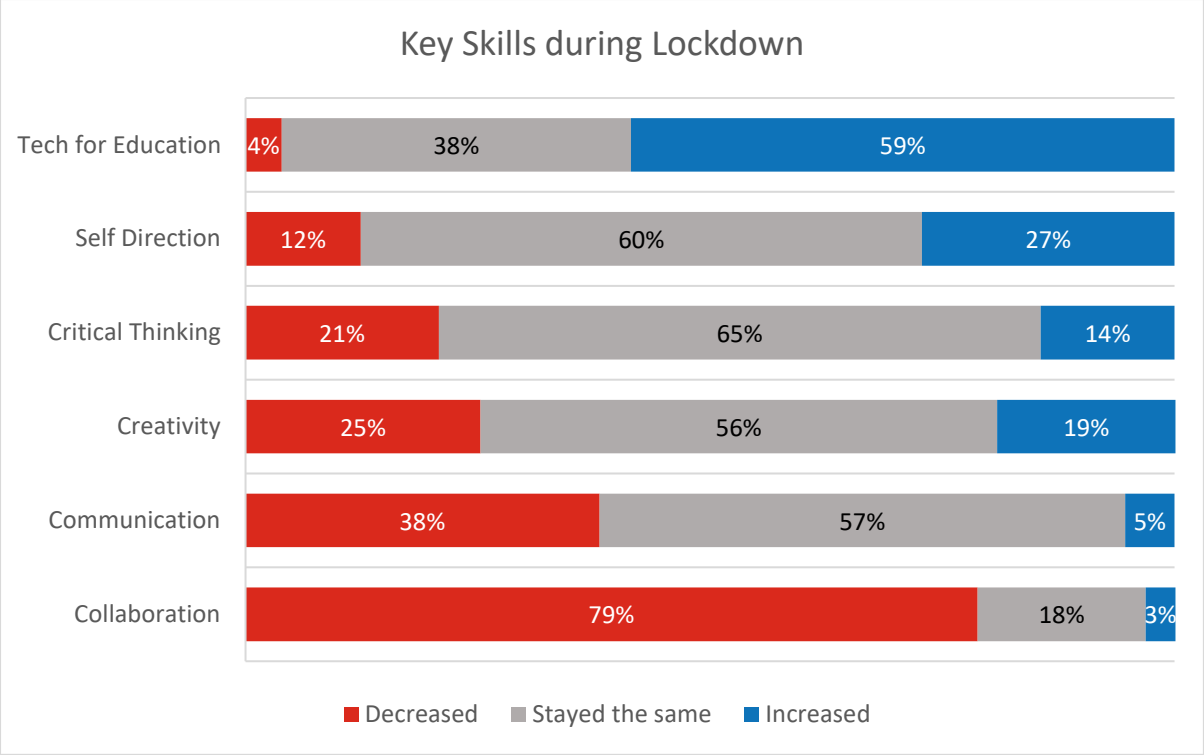

Figure 4.1: Teaching and Learning practices for Key Skills development during School Closures

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Given the enforced remote learning situation, it is unsurprising that the majority of students identified an increase in the kinds of practices that supported their use of technology for educational purposes. Interestingly, within this, the students reported a significant increase in the use of technology for team activities (Figure 4.2).

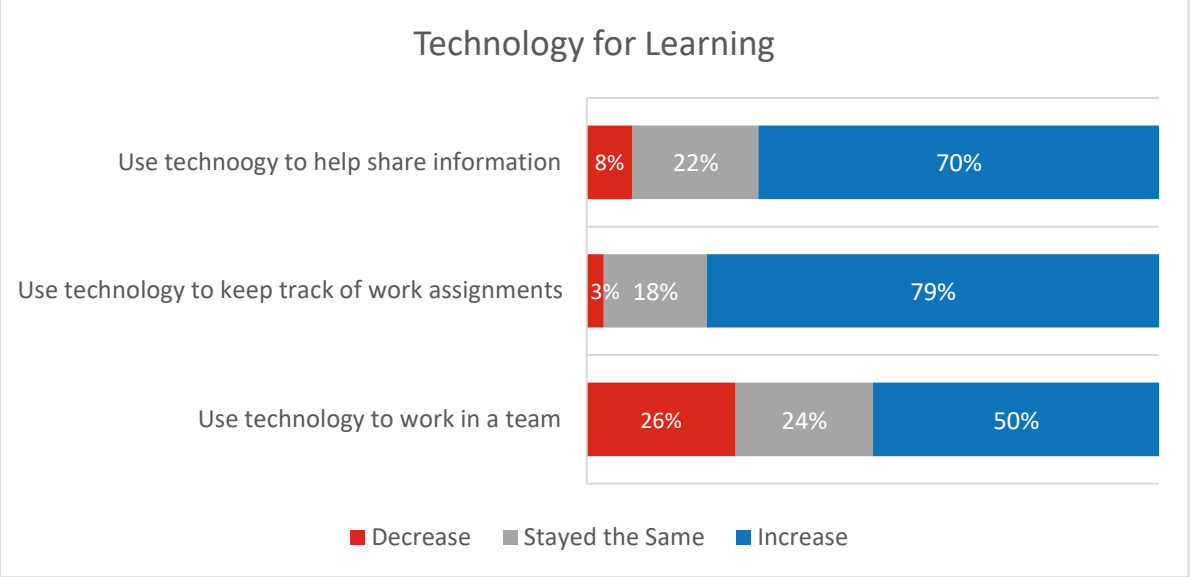

Figure 4.2: Technology for Learning during School Closures

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

However, although technology practices associated with teamwork had reportedly increased, collaborative activity overall had seen a very significant decrease (Figure 4.3). The reported decrease in practices that promote the development of collaborative skills, or working with others, has also been noted from the teachers' perspective (Devitt et al., 2020a).

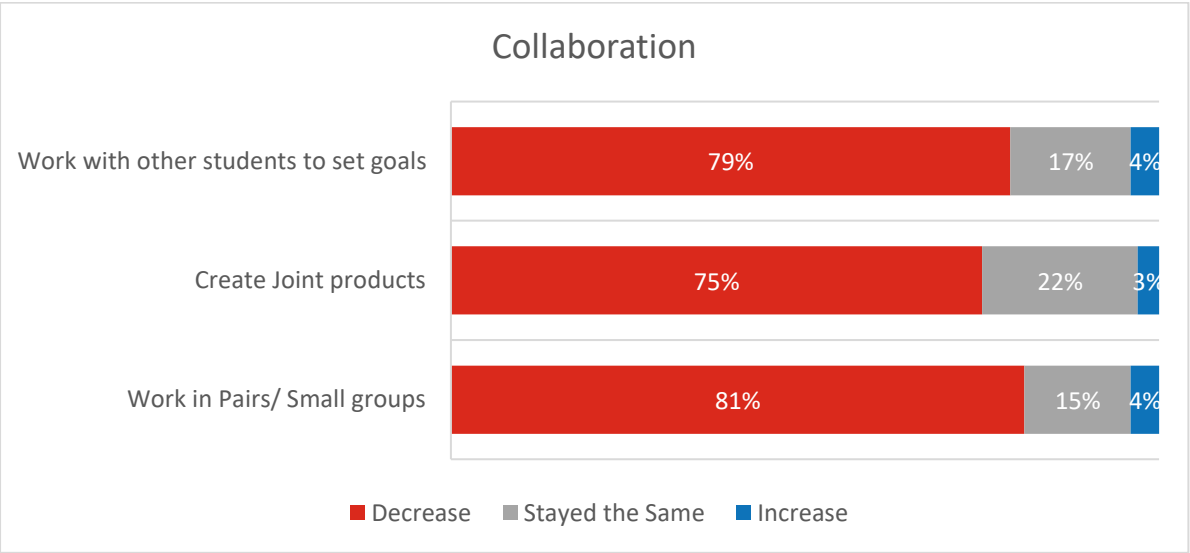

Figure 4.3: Collaboration during School Closures

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Qualitative responses from students support the quantitative results, highlighting the negative impact that the reduced collaboration has had in terms of wellbeing and learning:

> *I feel like the worked has increased and it is harder because I don't usually w*ork by myself
>
> *I can't see my friends or people and hold a proper conversation. This made me upset and angry, which in turn makes it harder for me to learn.*
>
> *Learning feels much more distant and lonely.*
>
> *Missed interaction/ collaboration with teachers and class*
>
> *Group work is scarce as it is hard for* everyone to be online at the same time.

Where there has been collaboration, the positive impact is evident in student responses:

> *There is more communications between teachers and students now. This makes doing the work easier because you can see all of the questions that people are asking and what answers the teachers are giving. It like a big team online and it makes the move to online school much easier.*

Levels of activities that support the development of communication skills also appear to have reduced somewhat for a significant proportion of this cohort of students. Examining these practices more closely (Figure 4.4), the use of multiple media for communication had significantly increased while live communication (presentations or questions from a teacher or audience) had decreased significantly. This mirrors the findings from teachers, who noted that the school closures have provided opportunities for enrichment of the media used to represent learning but reduced opportunities to interact around learning (Devitt et al., 2020a).

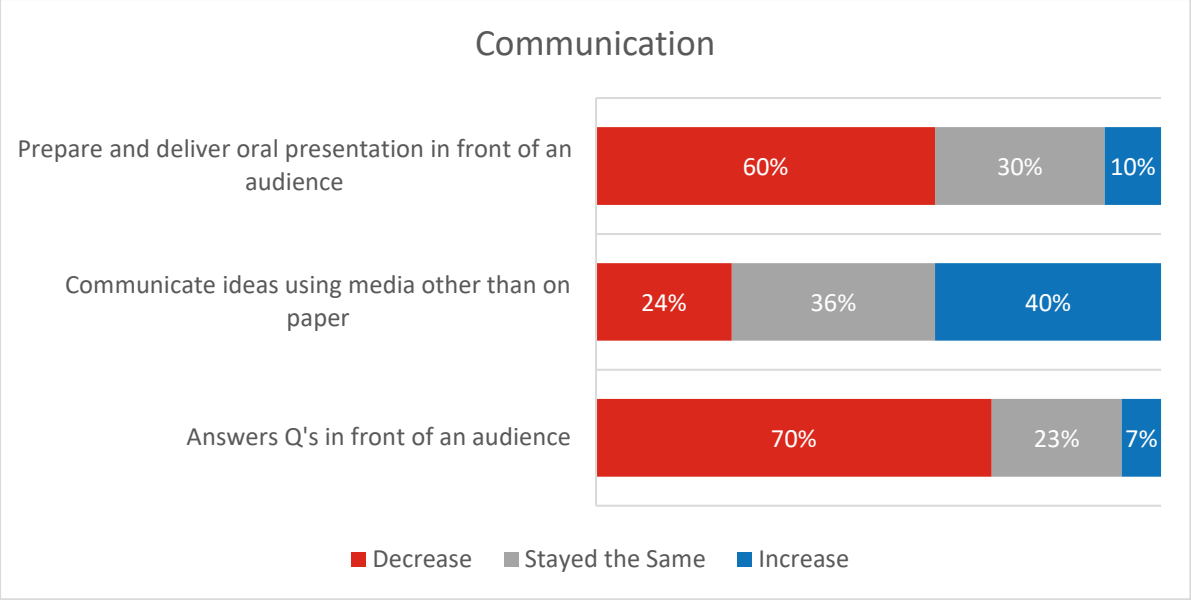

Figure 4.4: Communication practices during School Closures

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

The majority of students reported little change in teaching and learning practices that support creativity and critical thinking which would suggest that the work students were carrying out in the home is engaging higher order learning processes similar to in-school activity (applying knowledge and analysing to solve problems, evaluating results and content and creating and inventing novel solutions or expressions).

Students were also asked about particular "21st Century" teaching and learning practices associated with the Trinity Access activity model (use of project-based learning, group work, presentations, etc). The levels of exposure to 21st Century teaching and learning has been shown to have a positive influence on students' engagement with education, wellbeing, and student-teacher relationship (Bray & Byrne, 2019). Taken as a whole, the exposure to these practices did not reduce, but a more fine-grained analysis mirrors the results from the key skills questions, indicating that collaborative practices and opportunities to present work had decreased significantly, while the use of technology had greatly increased. Interestingly, 54 per cent of students reported that their teachers had become more creative and were presenting their lessons in different ways, and a third of students noted an increase in project work.

As regards student self-direction, students report little change. However, a more nuanced analysis shows that over a third of students recorded increases in self-direction relating to tracking progress and self-assessment, while 25 per cent note a reduction in the use of peer and teacher feedback.

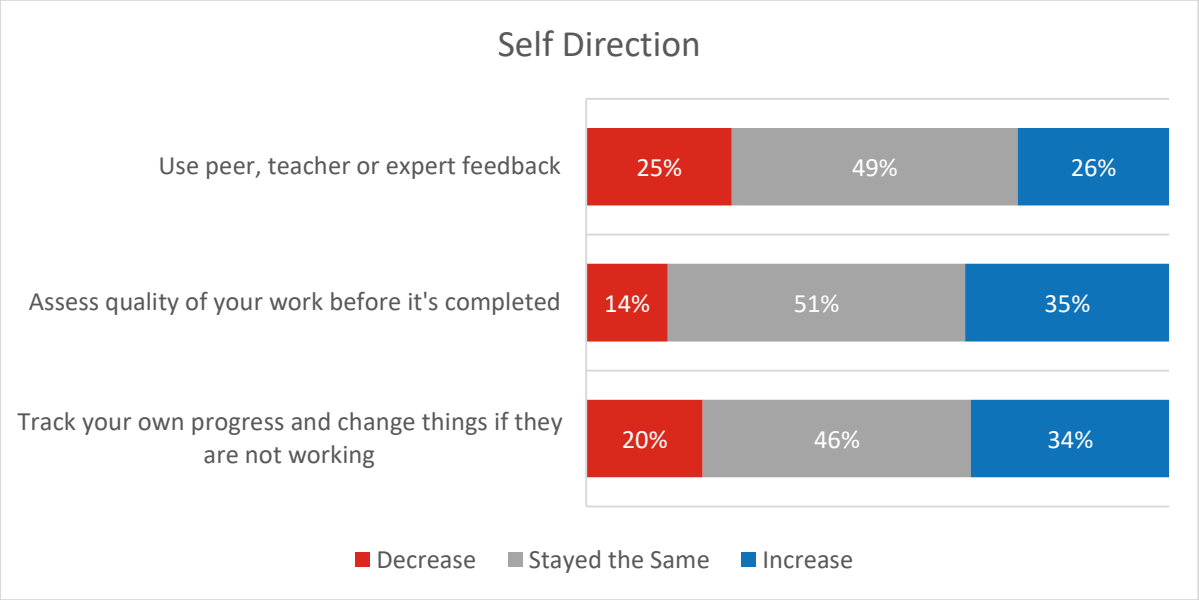

Figure 4.5: Self-direction (Managing Myself) practices during School Closures

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

These findings were consistent with the students' personal reflections in open-ended questions which indicate that for some, their skills in terms of self-directed, autonomous learning have flourished:

> *It's given me a lot more independence as most of it is independent learning*
>
> *We can get the work done in our own time and it is quieter, and we can learn at our pace.*
>
> *I was extremely stressed at the start of this because of workloads but I've learnt how to manage myself so it's easier...*

In an online context, assessment for learning (AfL) – i.e., the on-going teaching and learning process to help students improve their learning through feedback – is critical.

These results in relation to self-direction suggest that some students were more successful than others in making the transition to self-directed learning at home.

With regards to the provision of feedback, students were asked whether the level of feedback from teachers and peers had increased or decreased or stayed the same during school closures. Consistent with the significant reduction in collaborative activity, the level of feedback from peers had decreased for the majority of students (65 per cent – figure 4.6). Feedback from the teacher had increased for a significant proportion (37 per cent) but had decreased for over a quarter of students (26 per cent). Interestingly, AfL practices such as peer feedback, self-assessment, tracking progress and using feedback to progress work, were positively correlated with the level of feedback from teachers; [17] where students reported an increase in self- and peer-assessment and the use of feedback to progress their work, they tended to also report an increase in teacher feedback. This demonstrates the positive impact of consistent integration of AfL practices in some learning contexts, with teachers and learners working together to progress learning though self, peer and teacher feedback. This was not however the norm reported by students.

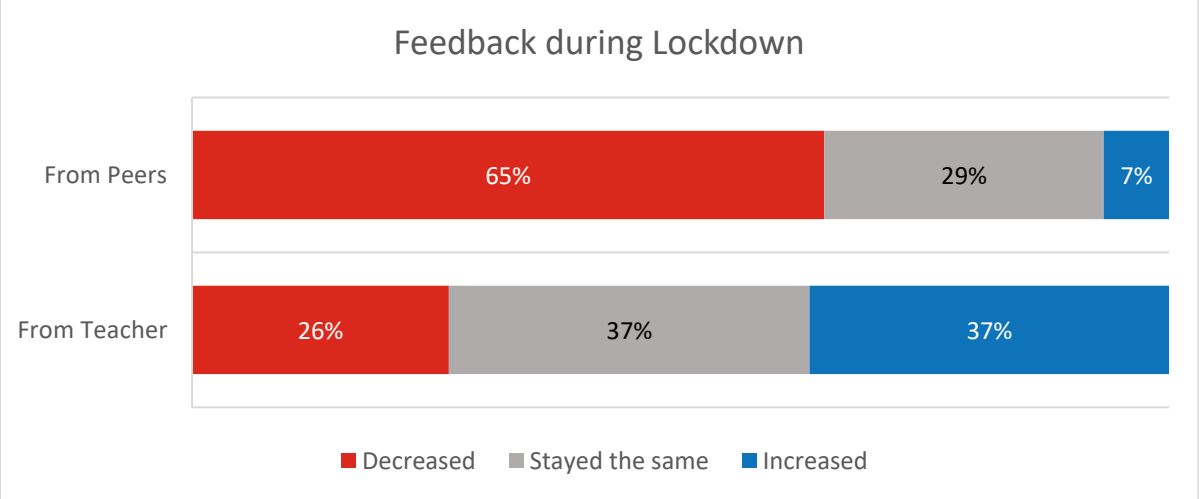

Figure 4.6: Changes in levels of feedback during School Closures.

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

[17] Pearson correlations: Peer feedback (R=0.276, p<0.01); Self-assessment (R=0.202, p<0.01); Tracking progress (R=0.123, p<0.01); Using feedback to progress (R=0.291, p<0.01)

It is positive to see that for the majority of respondents, the levels of feedback from teachers appear to have remained reasonably stable or increased, particularly taking into account the students' qualitative responses, which reflect how important this feedback was during school closure. Students report how feedback reduces their stress levels and allows them to progress their learning:

> *I can get lots of feedback from my work and I am less stressed about school*
>
> *I'm getting a lot of feedback instantly when I finish my homework or any tests which is good so I can learn from my mistakes and see where i went wrong right away*
>
> *I'm getting both positive and negative feedback and I'm able to change where I went wrong.*
>
> *I feel that I have become more stressed because of the increased workload online, but also, I have a clearer idea on what to improve on from teacher's feedback and comments on my work.*

Conversely, a lack of feedback negatively impacts on both stress levels and learning:

> *I feel more stressed to meet strict deadlines and copious amounts of work. The lack of feedback and direct teaching from most of my teachers has led to a lack of understanding of the material as well.*
>
> *Workload was heavy and difficult to organise/manage. Some teachers didn't teach at all, they only set work to be completed. Some teachers did not give feedback. I did not see my peers at all and had little communication with them.*

4.4 Factors associated with active engagement with education

As noted above, the student responses were mainly positive with regard to their engagement with education, with the majority of students in the medium to high category. As the study sample is self-selecting from the student population, this high level of engagement is not surprising. In this section we explore the factors, in particular in

relation to teaching and learning practices, associated with engagement in this student cohort.

Statistically significant positive correlations were identified between increases in practices to support the development of key skills and higher levels of active engagement with learning. The strongest relationships identified (medium effect sizes) were with practices that promote *critical thinking* and those that support *self-direction*[18].
These relationships were also noted in the qualitative analysis:

> *The move online can open up a student mind to new creative ideas and that may have a positive effect on students.*

The key role of learner autonomy and self-direction in learner motivation is well documented (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Little, 2007). In the qualitative data, the practices focused on the key skill of self-direction emerged as particularly significant in relation to active engagement with education.

> *I have also pushed myself harder to fully understand something before moving on to the next topic and being at home I can work at my own pace and not have to keep up with my teachers or other students so much.*

> *I think move online has led to some positive changes to myself as I can plan my own study and can catch up/revise what I need to revise. Also, more comfortable as don't have as much pressure as in school.*

Statistically significant correlations were also noted between changes in the levels of teacher and peer feedback, and active engagement with education.[19] This was reflected in the qualitative analysis, both from a negative perspective:

> *Harder for us to get our work corrected and have been less motivated to get up early to do work.*

[18] Self-direction and active engagement: $r(611) = .25$, $p < .001$; Critical thinking and active engagement: $r(610) = .25$, $p < .001$

[19] Teacher feedback and active engagement: $r(532) = .14$, $p = .001$; Peer feedback and active engagement: $r(531) = .10$, $p = .018$

and reflecting the relationship between greater active engagement and higher levels of teacher feedback:

> *Since moving to online school, I have found my teachers have been able to give me a lot of feedback nearly every single day which might not have happened in school as they could be too busy this has definitely contributed to positive learning.*

Building on the descriptive analysis, multilevel logistic regression modelling was used to investigate the determinants of low levels of student active engagement with learning. The correlations discussed above suggest an association between student engagement and teaching and learning practices. However, a number of characteristics can occur concurrently. In order to understand the processes shaping low levels of engagement, it is important to control for a number of factors simultaneously in a regression model. By doing this, we can estimate the extent to which the factors predict the outcomes in question. In order to conduct binary logistic regressions, the engagement scale variable was recoded such that the lower quartile of responses was categorised as *low active engagement with education.* The regression analysis explores student characteristics, teaching and learning practices and other measures of the student experience. Table 4.1 outlines the results of the multilevel binomial regression for active engagement with education.

Table 4.1: Factors influencing Low Active Engagement with Education

Factor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-.703©	.942	-.241
Students characteristics • Junior Cycle • Parental involvement with student's education	 1.130*** -.439***	 1.222*** -.372**	 1.231*** -.262*
Teaching and learning • 21C T&L		 -.991**	 -.813*
Student experience • Low wellbeing • Poor student-teacher relationship			 .877** .925***
Nagelkerke R2	.084	.107	.184

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Note: From a logistic regression model.

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; © p<.10.

The analysis indicates that student characteristics, in particular, age and parental involvement, are key determinants of engagement for students. The results suggest that respondents in the Junior Cycle programme in school (first – third year) were 3.1 times more likely to report low levels of active engagement with their education. Further examination of the data reveals significantly lower active engagement scores for students in second and third year, than in other years.[20] These results align with existing research that suggests that the second year in post-primary school tends to be an inflection point for educational disengagement (Hannon, 2018; McManus, 2013; Smyth, 2017).

[20] There was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA (F(5, 969) = 6.482, p < .000). Tukey post hoc tests revealed that levels of active engagement were statistically significantly lower in second year (3.38 ± .723) than in first year (3.66 ±.668, p = .013), TY (3.66 ± .653, p = .001) and sixth year (3.68, ± .640, p = .001). Statistically significantly lower active engagement was also identified in third year (23.4 ± 3.2) than in TY (3.66 ± .653, p = .016) and in sixth year (3.68, ± .640, p = .016).

Perceived levels of parental involvement with the students' education were identified through questions about the frequency of interactions in relation to homework, experience in school, tests/exams, and post-secondary school options. In line with existing research (Smyth, 2017) this model highlights how lower levels of parental involvement are predictors of low levels of active engagement with education (Smyth, 2017).

Exposure to teaching and learning practices that support the development of key skills was also identified as a significant predictor of the level of active engagement with education. This bears out the analysis of the qualitative data outlined above that points to increased levels of self-direction and student autonomy as being positively associated with higher levels of engagement and motivation:

> *Gives the student more time to understand what they are learning and to go over at their own speed.*

Previous research has identified the effect of student wellbeing on learners' active engagement with education (Frisch et al., 2005; Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011). Similarly, studies have highlighted connections between students' level of engagement with education and the relationship with their teachers (Clement, 2010; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Smyth et al., 2019). Both of these relationships were borne out by the findings of this study, with students with low wellbeing and those with poor student-teacher relationships 2.4 and 2.5 times respectively more likely to report low engagement with education during the lockdown period.

> *My social life has had a huge hit when we had to move online, since I can't see my friends or people and hold a proper conversation. This made me upset and angry, which in turn makes it harder for me to learn.*

> *The lack of physical guidance from teachers has left me feeling a bit unmotivated.*

4.5 Factors associated with positive student-teacher relationships

The analyses above have all pointed to the importance of the student-teacher relationship in sustaining student wellbeing and active engagement with learning. In the survey, students were asked to describe the perceived rapport and levels of respect that students report between themselves and their teachers using the five-item scale from the Student Engagement Instrument, a measure that has been validated and used with young people in various studies (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Betts, Appleton, Reschly, Christenson, & Huebner, 2010; Lovelace, Reschly, Appleton, & Lutz, 2014).

The student-teacher relationships scale is a 5-item measure relating to students' perceptions of their interactions with their teachers (Appleton et al., 2006). These were based on whether students felt teachers were there for them when they needed them, whether they felt listened to by adults in their school, whether they felt their teachers were interested in them as a person and not just as a student, whether teachers were open and honest with students, whether they cared about students and finally whether the student enjoyed talking to the teachers in their school.

This section explores the quality of the student-teacher relationship as represented by the mean of this six-item scale (range 1-5). As noted above, the average response was high (mean=3.62, stddev=0.728). As part of the longitudinal Trinity Access study, it was possible to compare student responses during school closures in 2020 with their responses in 2019. Examination of changes in student-teacher relationship scores show a statistically significant improvement from 2019 with a small effect size[21] (Figure 4.7).

[21] $t(533) = -3.680$, $p < .001$

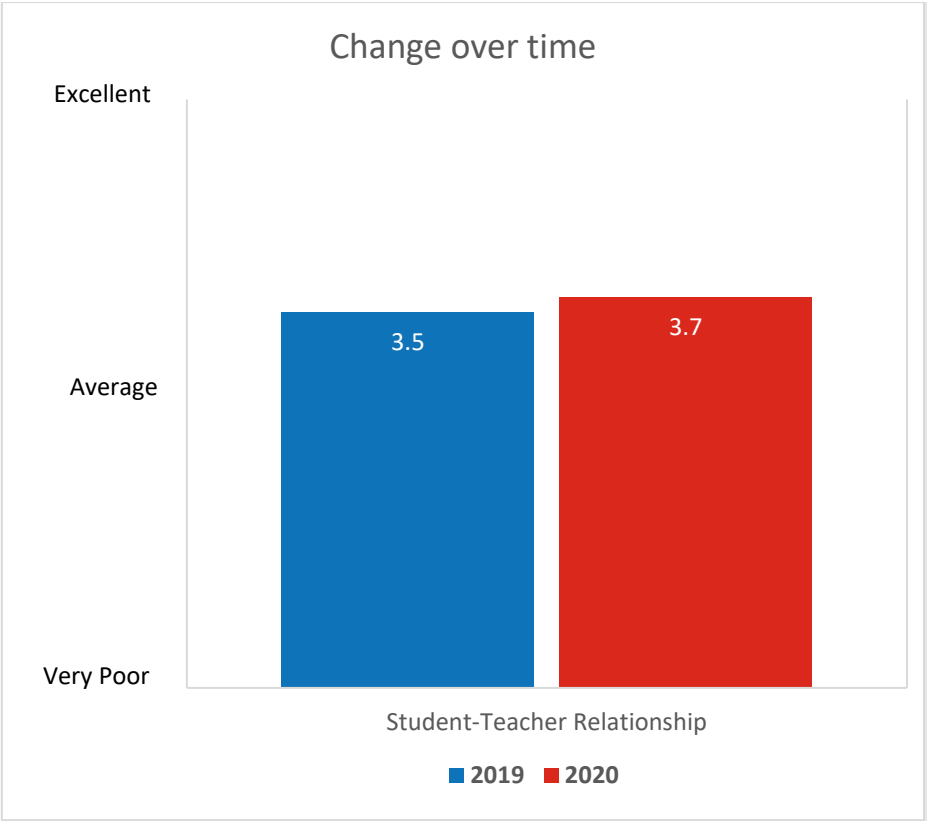

Figure 4.7: Significant changes over time in Student-Teacher Relationships.

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020 & Trinity Access Student Survey, 2019

Although small, the improvement in reported student-teacher relationships is particularly interesting given the current remote-learning situation. Analysis of qualitative student responses indicate that some students appreciated the individualised attention from their teachers that was necessitated by the unusual circumstances:

> *My teachers and principal listened and changed the workload to one piece of work a week from each subject to help relieve our stresses as students.*
>
> *There is more communications between teachers and students now. This makes doing the work easier because you can see all of the questions that people are asking and what answers the teachers are giving. It like a big team online and it makes the move to online school much easier.*

Such responses that refer to increased communication could be indicative of a positive effect from DES guidance to provide increased levels of support to students in DEIS

schools (DES, 2020c). Conversely however, for some students, lower levels of interaction with teachers negatively impacted on their relationships:

> *Teachers seem to be busier and less responsive to questions according to my peers and friends.*
>
> *I don't understand the work, the teachers seem to not care anymore.*

This relationship between the perceived level of feedback from the teacher and the quality of student-teacher relationships is mirrored in the quantitative analysis, with statistically significant positive correlations identified between levels of feedback from the teacher and student-teacher relationships.[22] These findings resonate with the findings from recent research in which practices that promoted collaboration and feedback were associated with greater student engagement with education (Devitt et al, 2020a).

Furthermore, the findings show significant positive correlations between increases in practices to support the development of the key skills and better student-teacher relationships. The strongest relationships (medium effect sizes) were identified between stronger *student-teacher relationships* and increases in activities that support the development of *creativity*.[23]

In order to control for a number of factors simultaneously, a multi-level logistic regression analysis of the factors predicting poor student-teacher relationships during the Covid-19 school closures was carried out. The results are summarised in Table 4.2.

[22] Teacher feedback and student-teacher relationship: $r(530) = .20$, $p < .001$.
[23] Creativity and student-teacher relationship: $r(616) = .26$, $p < .001$

Table 4.2: Factors influencing Poor Student-Teacher Relationship

Factor	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	-.283	1.839**
Students characteristics • Parental involvement with student's education	-.324**	-.254*
Teaching and learning • Feedback from teachers • Exposure to 21C T&L		-.337* -.888*
Nagelkerke R2	.024	.070

Source: Trinity Access Covid-19 Student Survey, 2020

Note: From a logistic regression model.

*** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; © p<.10.

As with the student attributes of engagement with education and wellbeing, perceived parental involvement with their education has emerged as fundamental to students' relationships with their teachers. In the above model, the findings show that as parent involvement increases, students were less likely to report experience poor relationships with their teachers. In addition, the model shows that reduced feedback from teachers and lower exposure to teaching and learning practices to develop key skills were identified as significant predictors of poor student-teacher relationships. The impact of teaching and learning practices that prioritise communication, creativity and collaboration on positive student-teacher relationships has been noted in previous research (Bray and Byrne, 2019).

A reduction in feedback and move away from these teaching and learning practices strongly suggest that student-teacher relationships, as with any relationship require communication to be sustained and in the absence of social presence and communication they deteriorate.

4.6 Summary

This chapter focused on students' experiences of school closures by focussing on their home-learning contexts, the teaching and learning practices used, their active engagement with learning and their relationships with their teachers. Overall, the respondents reported medium to high engagement with learning and quite positive relationships with their teachers, an artefact perhaps of the student self-selecting sample. The findings show many students had sufficient access to a device and quiet space for learning during school closures. However, a significant proportion were working at home in somewhat adverse conditions.

Four out of five students reported that their workload increased during school closures and some indicated difficulties in relation to managing this. Focussing on teaching and learning, students reported lower levels of practices that supported their development of the key skills of collaboration and communication, but higher levels of the use of technology for educational purposes. Given the nature of education online, it is perhaps not surprising that students reported increases in skills for self-direction.

The student responses on the provision and use of feedback is more varied however with the findings showing that the use of feedback was somewhat reduced during lockdown. Peer feedback was greatly reduced, reflecting the lack of collaborative activity online. Teacher feedback increased for just over one third of students but had decreased for over one quarter of students. This suggests variation across schools in the provision of feedback by teachers to their students. Research consistently demonstrates that student engagement with learning and student-teacher relationships have a powerful impact on educational experiences and outcomes for children and young people (McNamara et al, 2020). This study highlights the critical importance of teaching and learning practices, in particular feedback, in sustaining student engagement and educational relationships.
In line with existing research, these analyses also highlight the key role of parental involvement in education and the extent to which it impacts on student engagement and relationships at school.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study is the third in a series of reports on education during the Covid-19 school closures by the School of Education and Trinity Access. The purpose of this research series is to highlight the different experiences of this unprecedented period in the history of Irish education. This report provides an insight into the student experiences of education online during school closures and provides an important evidence base for policy in any future school closures and for education more generally. This chapter summarises the findings of the report and highlights some of the policy recommendations stemming from these findings.

5.1 Key findings of the report

Student wellbeing during school closures

The findings of the report highlight a decline in student mental health and wellbeing when comparing student responses during school closures in 2020 to the previous year. The reasons for this given by students in the survey included a perceived increase in workload, a lack of feedback from their teachers, and feelings of a lack of connection with their friends in school. The findings highlight the importance of parental involvement in supporting students during school closures. The findings show that, controlling for other factors, students who reported low parental involvement in their education were more likely to report having poor mental health and wellbeing. Those who reported having poor relationships with their teachers were also more likely to have poor mental health and wellbeing.

This report also explored the impact of changes to the Leaving Certificate examination on student wellbeing and stress. The findings highlight mixed views, with 50 per cent of respondents agreeing with the cancellation of the Leaving Certificate examination, but only 33 per cent agreeing with the use of calculated grades. Results of qualitative analysis provides important insights into students' perceptions of the failings of the current Leaving Certificate examination system to adequately reflect their work and achievement. Concerns were also identified in relation to the move to calculated grading, with many

students highlighting the potential impact of student-teacher relationships in this process. Incoming 6th year students also expressed concern about the interruption to their studies in their 5th year with some suggesting that this should be taken as an opportunity to reform the Senior Cycle with a move away from high stakes examinations towards continuous assessment.

Teaching, learning and school engagement

Focussing on teaching and learning, respondents reported lower levels of practices that supported their development of the key skills of collaboration and communication. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given the nature of education online, students reported increases in the development of self-direction skills and higher levels of the use of technology for educational purposes.

The relationship between the level of teacher feedback is strongly related to students' wellbeing and student-teacher relationships. While just over a third of students noted that the level of teacher feedback had increased, more than a quarter highlighted that the use of feedback reduced during lockdown. Peer feedback on the other hand was greatly reduced, reflecting the lack of collaborative activity online. Students' qualitative responses in relation to the provision and use of feedback from teachers indicates the critical importance of such practices in sustaining student engagement and educational relationships

Eighty per cent of students reported an increase in workload during school closures, with many indicated difficulties in relation to managing this.

Importance of Parental Involvement

The importance of parental involvement in the educational experience of the student has emerged in the quantitative analysis throughout this report. In line with existing research (Byrne and Smyth, 2011, Schoon, 2010; Williams et al., 2018), it is clear that students' whose parents show an interest in, and support their education are significantly more

likely to have higher levels of wellbeing, better engagement with education and stronger relationships with teachers.

Irish research shows, for example, a clear social gradient in student attainment and attitudes to education influenced by family income and mothers' education.[24] Similarly, research has indicated differences in parental expectations, with those from professional backgrounds reporting higher educational expectations for their children in comparison to parents from working-class backgrounds (Schoon, 2010; Williams et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that students from areas of socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to have the parental support to develop the social and cultural capital that can encourage progression to higher education (Hannon et al., 2017; Schoon, 2010; Williams et al., 2018). In such cases it could be argued that schools can play an instrumental role addressing the information gap through career guidance and other supports such as the Home-School Liaison scheme.

Research has shown that university-based widening participation outreach programmes, such as Trinity Access, which aim to increase students' social and cultural capital, have had a positive influence on young people's educational aspirations and goals, engagement with education and wellbeing (Hannon et al. 2017).

5.2 Recommendations for policy

The findings of this study have important implications for contingency planning for future school closures, but also for the re-opening of schools and for post-primary education more generally. The recommendations are categorised by whether they should be addressed by stakeholders at system level, or by school leaders and educators.

[24] https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/socio-economic-data-and-maps/lc-points-socio-economic-background-edscatterplot-201718-enrolments/

System-Level Recommendations

Wellbeing

Schools and teachers are important gatekeepers in terms of identifying early intervention opportunities for students with mental health difficulties. Staff need to be able to recognise the signs of distress and be confident that their students will have access to supports in a timely manner instead of having to deal with frustration around referrals to overstretched services.

- Continue to provide support for all school staff so that they can recognise signs of distress in young people.
- Provide adequate funding for appropriate services within and outside school so that supports can be provided in a timely manner for students in need.
- Prioritise wellbeing supports for young people returning to school and develop a wellbeing contingency plan for young people in the instance that school closures occur again.

Widening Participation

- Using existing supports such as the Home School Liaison Scheme, explore strategies to increase parental engagement with their children's schools and education (for both in-school and online education).
- Provide clarity around the role of the school guidance counsellor, firstly, in their pastoral role as a support for student wellbeing and engagement in school. Secondly, the role should equally act as a resource for career advice and provide students with relevant information as they make decisions around post-school pathways.
- Provide support for research and development of access and widening participation programmes that support the development of students' social and cultural capital by increasing aspirations. The university based, in-school outreach programmes, Trinity Access, is a good example of this.

Guidance for online teaching

- Further support teachers to engage with and make use of that the excellent resourced developed by the PDST for online teaching. This is particularly necessary for the facilitation of online collaboration and the provision of feedback.
- Given the critical importance of peer interaction for student wellbeing, a specific focus on best practices in the online breakout spaces should be addressed through the development of nuanced Child Safeguarding Statements. It is extremely important that students are encouraged to work together, but this must be conducted in a safe environment.
- Provide clear guidance for schools in relation to expected workload for their students in the event of school closures, taking into account the fact that the experience for students is very different online than in the face to face environment.

Senior Cycle Assessment

- Develop a clear plan in relation to Senior Cycle assessment for 2021 that is flexible and adaptable, regardless of whether or not terminal examinations can go ahead. In line with the Senior Cycle review (Smyth et al., 2019), a formalised system of continuous assessment, perhaps combined with fewer traditional examinations could be appropriate.

School- and Educator-level Recommendations

Wellbeing

- Ensure that all teachers are aware of the HSE and DES provision for wellbeing (https://pdst.ie/pp/healthandwellbeing) and provide opportunities for teachers to attend CPD in relation to how to promote good mental wellbeing amongst students.

Student Voice

- Prioritise **student voice and feedback**. Individual schools should make a concerted effort to provide avenues for students' voices to be heard. Students are the group that matters most, and their feedback is invaluable.
    - Do an audit of who has what in terms of available technology, broadband, quiet study space, etc.
    - Survey the students in relation to what they felt worked and what did not during the period of remote learning, and develop a plan that incorporates their feedback.
    - Provide support for the development of an active, potentially **online student council** in the school, if there is not one already in existence. Ensure that each class group has a method of having their voice heard.

Teaching and Learning

- Develop a contingency plan in case of further lockdowns, making sure that a **coordinated, whole-school approach** is taken to the provision of online learning.
    - Streamlined choice of platform and use of appropriate technology (https://www.webwise.ie/trending/distance-learning-safety-advice-and-considerations/ provides excellent advice in this regard).
    - Create and stick to a coordinated timetable.
    - Develop a **unified view of assessment and of workloads** for students. This will necessitate high levels of communication between teachers and with management to create a strategy around workload, with a maximum expected time allocation for each student based on departmental guidelines around timetabled teaching hours (200/240 timetabled hours) and the school's homework policy. This needs to be distributed across subjects in such a way that the student is not overloaded.
    - Long- and medium-term planning is essential, and all learning outcomes and **lesson outlines should be made available online** in case of absences by students or teachers.

- Students need appropriate **feedback**, but we acknowledge that this can be very time-consuming. Teachers need support and guidance to make use of diverse forms of feedback in the online space (self, peer, teacher, rubrics, etc.)
- Increase the use of virtual **strategies for reducing isolation** and building relationships for students during distance learning. This might involve increased levels of collaborative work, and the provision of opportunities for students to socialise during virtual break times. Also, acknowledging that the informal staff room conversations were missing, this should be formalised through some kind of online "catch up" session.
- Make sure to maximise real-time engagement online. Use it for active learning rather than just for lecturing, and to facilitate collaborative interaction where possible, following DES guidelines on best practice for online teaching.

In summary, through this research we have identified numerous factors that have had an impact on student experiences and engagement with online education during school closures. We recommend that a number of corresponding actions be considered by stakeholders, at government and school levels, in order to address the needs arising from school closures last year but also to plan for the contingency of any possible closures in the future.

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